







## THE GOLDEN MILESTONE





*Each man's chimney is his golden milestone.*

—LONGFELLOW.



# The Golden Milestone

By

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# THE GOLDEN MILESTONE

## CHAPTER I

### OFF THE HIGH ROAD

#### I

IN the little town of Ruggenham, on the edge of Canford Chase, the shutters had been down barely an hour, and shopkeepers were still collecting sleep-scattered wits in preparation for the activities of Saturday morning, when word was passed from little shop to little shop that something unusual was afoot. Lawyer Meecham had a client.

Ruggenham Town is five miles across the Chase from Hendiford and the coal mines, and it is still a tiny market town, given over exclusively to the use and pleasure of the farmers who dwell about it. It was natural that in such a remote, self-contained little place, with little scandal and less crime to gladden the day's conversation, Lawyer Meecham's scarce clients should receive pointed attention. The objects of their errands were usually known, so that an especial piquancy was given to the event when Sylvester Dawe, from Abbott's Crawford, a man with neither property nor enemies, drove up on his old motor-cycle combination and, apparently propelled by eager excitement, entered the dusty little office of the lawyer in the High Street. Assistants peered over their wares at the abandoned combination, and speculation was upon their tongues.

"That's the trouble—wenches again," said old Harmsworth, the butcher, to his son Jack, when the shop was customerless. "It's breach o' promise. Or wuss. . . .



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Oh, I've heerd the tales about 'im! A reglar thing to 'ear as ae's chucked up some poor lass an' took on wi' a fresh-un. . . . Wants 'osswhippin', an' I've said so afore. . . . But I've warned y' about it. An' now y' see what it comes to!"

Jack, a callow youth whose after-hours' activities in a "stand-up" collar had caused domestic dissension, looked down his nose and chopped, with equivocal viciousness, at a sheep's head.

"I dunna see as it could be that," replied Mrs. Harmsworth acidly, the remnants of the domestic dissension in her voice. "We should ha' knowed on it afore this."

A customer entered for a pound of liver, and the butcher contented himself with a grunt. Across the street old Johnson, the too-zealous constable, was bending beside the combination: he inserted a stick in the silencer—"Meckin' believe ae earns 'is pay," ran the general thought)—withdrew the stick, stared weightily upon it, and then strolled on, throwing cocksure glances from left to right. And then a tall, black-avised young man appeared at the lawyer's door. Sylvester Dawe! Looks became intent.

He seemed in good spirits; a little dazed, perhaps.

"Looks as if it's money," murmured Mrs. Harmsworth shrewdly.

"Money?" cried the butcher angrily. (She was trying to undermine his parental authority, he secretly decided.) "An' wheer can ae 'ave money from? Tell me that, then! . . . A norphan, an' 'is mother was as poor as the devil, same as all the Wintertons."

"Unless 'is father died an' left 'im summat," she persisted.

"What? A gipsy leave owt?" he asked with fine contempt. "Besides, I 'spect ae's got another wife an' kids somewheer about the country. Same as this chap"—indicating Sylvester Dawe—"it's court all an' marry none! An' if this-un ain't got some poor gel into trouble, same as 'is dad, then . . . then call me a fool! . . . No, there ain't no money about it. It's wenchin', that's what it is!" He threw a wrathful glance from fat-

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encircled eyes across the street. "A reglar lad, they reckon!"

The "reglar lad" had lifted a great farmer's foot over the motor-cycle, and before starting up the engine he filled and lit a cherry-wood pipe. The morning sun was upon his face, warming its sallow swarthinness and sparkling in his black eyes. He wore no hat, as usual, upon his black, oily curls, and his lean face, with its tiny black foreign moustache, attracted the eye by its startling incongruity among these fair, tow-headed natives of eastern Staffordshire. The face was youthful and pleasant; it was a bold face and head, carried with a flamboyant, foreign air. One felt that he should have borne many-coloured ribbons and carried a guitar, that his home was further south, where blood is hot and thin, and the sun is master of the world. Yet, upon closer inspection, there were many contradictions; his black eyes were not bold, but rather secret, like the eyes of one whose looks turn admiringly inwards, and his awkward knees and elbows, plainly seen as he sat, and his lubberly hands and feet, were the common adjuncts of the young farmers among whom he was numbered. It was only in the head that the strangeness lay, a coarse, wild, flaunting head with which a forgotten poppy, hooked carelessly behind his ear, was strangely in keeping. As he kicked his engine into life one saw the breadth of his young shoulders beneath the old grey sports coat, the scraggy legs in soiled breeches and gaiters, and the green stains upon the heels of his great boots, where cowdung had dried. Such was Sylvester Dawe, whose gipsy father had bequeathed to him more than illegitimacy.

With a buoyant gesture he hitched up his breeches, and with his uncovered head held high, and his full lips pursed about his pipe-stem, he rattled off up the High Street to the harsh clatter of clumsily manipulated gears, leaving behind him in the town augmented speculation and a grievous sense of injury at the mystery of his coming.

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A hundred yards beyond the railway station, where the fields come right up to the town walls, he pulled up for a moment to gloat upon a wallet stuffed with five-pound notes. After his scrutiny he carefully stowed away the wallet in his breast pocket and, smiling upon the world, continued upon his way. It was a beautiful summer morning, with promise of heat to follow, and Sylvester Dawe liked to feel the sun; just the kind of morning for a legacy, he thought happily, as he swung the combination round into the more easterly of the two roads from Ruggenham to Abbott's Crawford. In the hollows of the fields the mist, earth's filmy night apparel, gently rose, revealing her naked beauty to the sun. There had been rain before seven, and every leaf upon the trees and hedges, every wayside flower, and every neat grass-trimming put out a clean morning face for the sun's inspection. Wild life luxuriated here, in spite of the shadow of the Black Country upon the horizon. Beside the road grew purple ironweed, little red robins and the misty blue rosettes of chicory, milfoil and red campion, and frilled bindweed, that rose-coloured enemy of the corn; while on the hedges swarmed tufted vetch, like clusters of purple butterflies, and here and there, in shady corners, rose lords and ladies with their burnished rods of office, and here and there, shunning the sun, the bewitched flowers of the nightshade. Larks sang above the coppices, where rabbits were taking their last gambols, and all the myriad stealthy life of a summer morning crept unseen in the crannies. Farm hands worked in the fields, here herding back cattle to the meadows, there gathering hay, and, at the sheep-wash, hurrying clumsily about the dipping. The earth was young and fresh once more, the morning as cleanly new-coined as that far-away morning when a Child lay in a manger, and England stirred, refreshed, to more persistent labour. Little warm airs played about the trees, as if they loved the quaint little lanes, and in the hedges and in the banks beneath,

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a thousand bird mothers sang a sweet, wordless song in praise of living and of motherhood.

Sylvester Dawe drove slowly, without impatience to share the news of his good fortune, for he was a young man sufficient unto himself. The fingers upon the throttle levers of the motor-cycle were restless, and there was an air of subdued excitement about him. His pipe was out, but he still puffed furiously, with enjoyment. . . .

A hundred and fifty pounds, eight shillings and sixpence, Lawyer Meecham had said, and had been as good as his word! A hundred and fifty pounds! A little fortune!

Who would have thought that his mother, so long dead, would have had so much to leave him, she a farmer's daughter, with neither marriage lines nor husband to insure herself against the expenses of his birth? And why had Granny Mary kept silence about the money all these years, when the anticipation would have helped him through the dark days? And again, why had his mother stipulated that he was to receive the money on his twenty-fifth, and not his twenty-first birthday? . . . But why worry his head about such matters? What did anything matter beside the fact that he carried one hundred and fifty pounds, eight and six in his breast pocket? . . . He was *free*, free of the farming life, free of the muddy thralldom of the country, free to go out, as he so earnestly desired, to see the world—France, Spain, Italy. . . . His heart leaped suddenly at the ecstasy of the thought, and he licked dry lips, pushed his empty pipe into his pocket and pursued his way, singing softly, yet with a little tremor of excitement in his song. The horizons seemed to have slipped back, the world had become more open and free, and as an earnest of the happiness in store for him the sun shone and the world seemed dressed in her cleanest, brightest colours, as for a holiday. . . .

As he approached the long, low front of the Bull and Spectacles he heard a merry, nasal voice singing in the recesses of a tall holly that stood beside the road:

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*"W-hell! . . .  
'Ow y' gonna keep-em . . .  
Down-on . . .  
The farm . . .  
After they've seen Paree? . . .  
An' 'ow y' gonna keep-em . . .  
From Pick-er-dil-ly? . . .  
A-jazzin' around . . .  
A-paintin' the town . . ."*

But here the singer saw Sylvester, and called out :  
"Sylvie! Sylvie Dawe!"

Sylvester stopped, but for some moments could not see Johnny Waters, whose throaty squawk was unmistakable. But at last he descried the tall, thin, flashily dressed figure beneath the holly tree. Johnny Waters had been "nesting," for at heart, in spite of his town clothes, he was still a countryman.

"Ang on a tick," he said obscurely. And, with a comical air of reproach: "It ain't like you, Sylvie, to pass old friends like that, blindin' along an' raisin' the dust!" He shook his lean length like a dog, approached the combination, and there struck an attitude. And when Johnny Waters struck an attitude one saw to advantage his loose-jointed awkwardness, which he usually carried with an air of ludicrous dignity. "Bit of all right, this, Chawles!" he said loftily. Then he coiled up his long young body in the side-car and cried to the heavens: "Home, John!"

"It's a nice thing to see a stalwart young man like you robbing birds' nests at your time of life, Johnny!" said Sylvester, adopting the spirit of the encounter. "Rise, Johnny! England has need of you!"

"Haw! Haw! What did *you* do in the great war, daddy?" he said, guffawing, and displaying his two rabbit teeth that, with his pointed, inordinate nose, were the most noticeable features of his face. He produced a flimsy tin cigarette-case. "'Ave a Flor de Cabbahge," he said. And when their cigarettes were lit he pulled down his canary-coloured waistcoat and grinned upon

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the road. "Bit of all right, this, what?" he asked. "Like blinkin' aristocrats!" And in cheerful good humour he began to mutter queries about the whereabouts of flies in winter-time.

"What's this mean, Johnny?" asked Sylvester, slowing the combination to make himself heard.

"This? . . . What? . . . Oh, *me*? . . . Oh, I got fed up with workin' for that firm" [he was employed to peddle goods by a Ruggenham firm of cheap tailors], "so when they dropped me wage again an' then gi'ed me notice 'cause I wouldn't 'ave it—why, I put me notice in. . . . Ah! . . . I'm thinkin' o' gettin' a little shop in Crawford, soon's me notice is up. Startin' on me own." He gave Sylvester a fleeting, furtive look. "Y' know, what a chap like me wants is reglar money, Sylvie."

"That's right, Johnny," said Sylvester, vaguely, thinking with delight of his legacy.

Johnny glanced into his face, and then, with a deliberate attempt at casualness, he asked: "'Ow bin they all up at the farm?"

"Pretty well, thanks."

"Granny Mary still as 'ale as ever, I 'ope?"

"Oh, yes." Sylvester suddenly remembered that Johnny had attended service at the Crawford chapel on the previous Sunday, where he *must* have seen Granny Mary and the family. He glanced down, and was puzzled to see the blood in Johnny's thin, roughened cheeks. And then he grinned amazedly, and laughed out, careless of Johnny's feelings. For Sylvester Dawe was not accustomed to spend over-much thought on the feelings of others.

"Perhaps it's Gaffer John y' want to know about, Johnny?" he asked, with a clumsy attempt at raillery. "Or Gladys May? Or Mr. Redfin, maybe?"

"Or Sally Twitten!" chuckled Johnny, but without mirth.

They kept silence for some time. Then Sylvester turned and said: "Oh, she's all right, Johnny. Not married yet."

"Who d'y' mean?" asked Johnny, but did not look up.

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"A certain young lady at the farm."

"I dunna 'ave nowt to do with 'em," said Johnny evasively. "The last one I 'ad treated me rotten . . . rotten! . . . Wanted to know do I believe in long engagements! . . . Ah! . . . 'Strewth!" He ruminated, while Sylvester smiled slyly upon the road. "But I soon laid *that* specter. It was the night I 'ad the row. Y' see, we got inside the picture palace on the Bridge at Walsall. Name o' Tiny. *Ur* name, I mean, the wench I was with. . . . Well, ur'd got one o' these 'ere vanity bags. Y' know?"

"Yes."

"Well, I got a-messin' about inside it, a-paintin' meself up. . . . Ah! . . . Powder an' paint an' eyebrow polishers an' everythin'!" He chuckled at the recollection. "Course, it was dark. Well, what d'y' think? Like a bleedin' fewl I come walkin' out with all me war paint on, an' never gi'ed it a thought until the bother started. . . . But I up wi' me fist, an'——!"

"Who at? Who to?" interrupted Sylvester.

"This chap I'm tellin' y' about, the chap ur'd bin carryin' on with be'in' me back. Ae started to grin like a fewl. . . . A *ape*, I call 'im!" Johnny ended with offended dignity, seeing Sylvester's smile.

"What did he say?" prompted Sylvester.

"Oh, ae was on about the Bearded Lady or summat," Johnny said with disgust. "But I just drewed me fist back an' g'ied 'im a 'alf-arm jab like—oh, sorry!"

"That's all right, Johnny."

"Well, that was the last I seen on 'im, nor nobody else, if the trewth could be knowed, I reckon."

His great laugh blared out through his nose, and his receding chin receded still further beneath his rabbit teeth. Sylvester laughed, too, and something in his face caused Johnny to gulp and choke at some frantic recollection. After a time he remarked, off-handedly: "Course, that's bin years ago. Donkey's years."

"Yes, of course," said Sylvester. "But it's one of the best tales I've heard, Johnny! I'll tell that to Belle when I get to the farm. She *will* enjoy it!"

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Johnny caught at his breath and gulped again. He turned urgently in the side-car. "No, dunna say nothin' to nobody about it, not to nobody dontcher!" he pleaded in alarm. "Y' see. . . y' see it was only a tale, like. . . . There ain't nothin' in it, not nothin' at all!" He laughed uneasily. "I was just pullin' y' leg. Y' dunna think I should 'ave anythin' to do with 'em, an' me so busy teckin' orders. Not likely! No, course not, thank God!"

They were breasting the hill that rises to the village street, and facing them from the summit was one of the girls' colleges that the village houses. Johnny sat glooming upon the road, casting concerned glances at Sylvester's face, which was turned towards the Briscoe Farm, where Marion Briscoe lived. They ran on into the village street.

Johnny uncoiled himself from the clutch of the side-car, and pulled his trousers and coat and canary-coloured waistcoat into shape.

"Thanks, Sylvie," he said without warmth, tilting his bowler over one ear. "By the way, dunna say nothin' about *that*, will y'?"

"About what?" Sylvester teased him.

"About *that*. *That* what I was a-tellin' y'."

"Righto, Johnny," said Sylvester. "I won't give you away."

Young Martha Hales, with her hair newly bobbed, passed along the pavement, and nodded, smiling, to Johnny. She half hesitated, as if desirous of returning. Smiling quizzically at Johnny, Sylvester glided off towards Crowmarsh. Johnny glanced after him, and then round to young Martha Hales. And with a hurt shrug he strolled along to the girl.

"Y' might as well be 'ung for a sheep as a goat," he muttered miserably to himself. And then, with a sprightly inflection of voice, to the girl: "'Ello, little one! Whither away?"



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## 3

Sleep held the village. Upon each side of the tiny street were little thatched cottages, each with its three steps before the door and shutters to its latticed windows. A great black and white inn, The Goat's Head, brooded in the morning sun, standing where the street made a slight turn to avoid a tiny, triangular village green, where a bevy of geese walked airily about in the shade of the six-legged, thick-ankled market shelter. The Goat's Head, a relic of coaching days, had four rivals in the trade; besides these there was no other place of entertainment. There was a tiny chapel, a tiny church, a tiny school, and another girls' college that overlooked the street as if it were an ancient keep. The solitary policeman had not had a case in seven years; he was an institution, like the old schoolmaster, and you could put your hand upon the pair every Saturday night as they sat drinking together, and engaged in heady argument, beneath the foxes' masks and the old sporting prints in the smoke-room of The Goat's Head. And invariably both were drunk when the inn closed for the night.

Besides Johnny Waters and young Martha Hales only three slow, apparently bewitched humans occupied the village street as Sylvester sped along. Sparrows twittered about the thatched eaves; rooks cawed in hoarse discontent from a near-by rookery; a blacksmith's hammer sang musically from some hidden forge; and the cooing of wood pigeons seemed to possess the village. The street was bare and tiny, showing its fresh colours like a picturesque toy, and above all was a sense of repose, as if nothing stirred from January to December, as if all was sunk in a never-ending sleep. Yet behind the latticed windows and muslin blinds and leaf-scattering geraniums the villagers took keen ocular toll of passers-by.

At the end of the village street Sylvester Dawe turned into Lovers' Lane, that leads from the village to the hamlet of Crowmarsh, a half-mile beyond. It was a very narrow, little lane, set deep below the level of the fields, and dear to the hearts of the villagers; over-run by wild

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roses and thistles, it wound down a steep hill, where cornflowers crept down to mock the bleaching fairy faces of bird's eye, then across a wooden bridge humped over the Abbey River, and climbed a lesser declivity before dropping steeply into the wet hole in which the hamlet lay.

Crowmarsh consisted of five houses only, and was the loneliest and most stagnant hamlet in Staffordshire. Even the villagers spoke of it as "The End of the World." Four of the houses were labourers' cottages, small, whitewashed and thatched dwellings set steeply askew upon inclined gardens, where fruiting apples and damsons rose precariously from beds of cabbages and potatoes. The fifth house, the Old Manor Farm, stood upon the opposite side of the road (that is, on the left when approaching from the village); though a house of fallen fortunes, it still sat in dilapidated magnificence above the hamlet. It was a large, whitewashed, square-fronted, unkempt farmhouse. On the front was a porticoed door of stone that crumbled in the damp air. There were four windows on each side of the door, two above and two below, and at the corners were tiny dormer windows. The whole place had a ramshackle, comfortless air. Great longitudinal cracks ran up the black oaken beams that patterned the front; untidy ivy and virginia creeper ran over the left side of the front, while the right bore upon its soiled whitewash tattered scraps of leather where ivy had originally grown. The small garden that ran down to the road looked neglected and unloved, in spite of its pansies and lilacs and sweet country roses. Damp and neglect had been the two most persistent enemies of the structure. The whole hamlet was a natural depression, and the healthy reach of the Abbey River was shut out by the intervening ridge. Fogs and morning mists persisted here until mid-day, and runnels of brackish water spoiled the lower pastures.

Two short wings ran back to form, with stables upon the fourth side, a small courtyard, which was reached from the road by a neglected, grass-starred drive. As Sylvester Dawe rode up into the courtyard he frowned

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heavily upon an espalier plum that drooped in fruitless abandon upon the south wall beside the chimney ex-crescence; he was thinking of Aunt Deborah, of the farm's debts, and of the tragic possibility of having to share his legacy. He set his lips firmly. . . .

A fair, plump girl of eighteen turned from scattering corn upon the moss-rimmed tiles, where fowl fed like greedy automatons, and hurried across to him.

"Well, Sylvie?" she questioned anxiously. "Was it anything bad?"

"No. Mother left me some money," he said.

"Much?" breathed the girl, with wide-open eyes.

"Just over a hundred and fifty," he said, trying to speak the amount casually.

She pressed his arm affectionately, her blue eyes dancing with pleasure. "Oh, Sylvie!" she gasped. And quickly: "What shall you do with it?"

He glanced evasively at her corn-bag. "I don't know yet," he lied. "I haven't decided." Then, to escape further interrogation, he said: "I met somebody in a canary-coloured waistcoat this morning, Belle!"

Poor Belle blushed. "I don't know who you mean," she lied in turn, careless of her grammar. "A canary-coloured waistcoat?"

"Yes." And leaning forward, he whispered with mock secrecy: "He's in the village, Belle. And thinking of coming back to Crawford for good!"

"Is he?" said poor Belle, and then, blushing as he laughed at her admission, she showered corn with full hands about his head, so that he was obliged to run for the back door of the house.

Chuckling and running with his face turned down, he blundered into a tall, grim, middle-aged woman. He turned, and the laughter died on his lips.

"You've bin a long time," she said ungraciously. "Well, what was it?" But before he could frame the first words of his reply she looked beyond him to Belle, who was slinking back to her poultry. "Be careful wi' that corn . . . wasting!" she cried. "I'm sure the waste on this place 'ud be enough to mortify a saint!"

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"They'll eat it up, mother," ventured Belle, while Sylvester, glad of the momentary respite, entered the house. "It won't be wasted."

"That's as may be, but it isna for you to say, my gel!" replied Aunt Deborah, sustaining her voice upon a high, irritating monotone. "An' it's time Jack's dinner was took up to the field. Just you fasten them fowl up an' get off with it!"

"All right," Belle mumbled reluctantly.

Aunt Deborah turned and entered the house.

## CHAPTER II

### THE BEQUEST

#### I

A NARROW hall ran from the front door to the back door, across the centre of the house. Entering by the back door, Sylvester turned into the kitchen on the right.

Ordinarily it was a dark room, but coming in from the sunlight, with eyes still dazzled by the bright vision of the future, it seemed doubly dark. It was rectangular in shape. Its desert of unevenly tiled floor still shone in places from its morning scouring, and the scents of soap and furniture polish still tainted the air. Upon the right, as one entered, was a small window that looked out over the courtyard; facing the door, upon the opposite side of the room, was a great fireplace flanked by inglenooks, in one of which sat a tubby, self-absorbed little old man; upon the left were the two long latticed windows that looked over the garden and the road to the four cottages opposite. A door on the right of the fireplace led to the scullery in the wing, while a door in the same side as the entrance door led to the bedroom floor, the outline of the stairs being plainly seen in the narrow hall.

The furniture of the kitchen was of a rough, homely kind. There was a deal table covered with American oil-cloth, a half-dozen unmatched chairs, a "squab," or wooden sofa, a large, sombre oak cupboard decorated with crude carving, a grandfather clock beside the stair door, and a corner cupboard, which when open disclosed a litter of papers and bottles, glass jars paper-capped and labelled, a storm lantern, a few thick books on cattle and horse diseases, the first half of an old year-book, and "Adam Bede" in a shilling paper suit. The low ceiling—so low that Aunt Deborah and Farmer John and Sylvester

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were barely accommodated thereunder in comfort—was beamed with old oak, upon which generations of Winter-tons had plastered whitewash until now the surfaces of the beams were smooth. There were three pictures on the walls. The largest, that stood between the hall door and the bedroom door, showed a fatuous young lady, clad in modest and unattractive night attire, clinging to a cross set inexplicably in a turbulent sea; the title was "Rock of Ages." Then beside the small window that looked over the courtyard there was a small, amateurish oil-painting of the farm in winter, its latticed windows all glowing with orange light; this was the work of Sylvester Dawe. And between the latticed windows was a framed supplement called "Wedding Bells," showing a fresh-coloured, pill-box-hatted soldier and his smiling bride entering the lych-gate of an old church, while besmocked natives cheered ingenuously. Other mural decorations were an anachronic almanac, smoke-dried beside the fire (where it faced a copper warming-pan), and above the fireplace, in the position of honour, was hung a meretricious-looking card bearing a two-coloured scroll, "*God is Love.*" Two ferns, a geranium and a cactus stood in pots in one of the latticed windows, while the other held fuchsia plants; a copy of the *Staffordshire Advertiser* lay upon the "squab"; and a lean black cat threw a too-intelligent glance at Sylvester from her seat upon the coarse strip of red matting before the fire. The whole room had the comfortable air that comes to a room after long years of settled occupation, yet it was dark, and there were no easy-chairs and no cushions, for Aunt Deborah said that cushions were for the idle, while good boards made straight backs. It was a saying typical of her.

"Well, what was it?" she asked, coming in from the hall. "Some more trouble, I reckon?"

"No," he said.

"It isna what you thought, money?"

"Yes," he said, blowing down his pipe-stem with a much-needed assumption of ease.

"Oh," she replied, starting at the affirmation.

"Yes, money," he said, attempting a gay tone. "A

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hundred and fifty pounds, eight and six ! . . . And here it is in notes, paid up on the nail ! ” And he slapped down the roll of notes upon the table before her.

She glanced suspiciously from him to the money, and then touched one of the notes gingerly with her red, calloused hand. “ You’re sure it’s come by proper ? ” she asked in her hard voice.

“ Course. . . . He said . . . Lawyer Meecham . . . that mother left it me. ” He lowered his voice, for his illegitimacy was a subject still beyond casual speech.

“ *Your mother ?* ” she muttered incredulously.

“ Yes. ”

“ Ur left it you ? By Lawyer Meecham ? ”

“ Yes. ”

She snorted suddenly. “ Well, that’s the first I’ve ’eerd about it ! ” she said, and glanced away into the past in vain search of some memory. He watched her—the grim Roman emperor head with its high, thin nose, the long, down-turned, nonconformist mouth bounded by two grim lines from the base of the nose, the tiny, hairy mole where the right lobe of the nose met the cheek. “ ‘Ow much, did y’ say ? Give me my glasses. ”

He reached the polished case from the shelf above the fireplace, leaning unceremoniously above the tubby little old man. Donning her glasses she slowly worked through the notes with fingers that poverty made to tremble, while he stood before her, impatient and uneasy.

A little, bent old lady entered from the scullery. She had tiny, bunched red cheeks, rosy as apples, old peering eyes that were yet as blue as harebells, and the sweetest old smile imaginable. This was Sylvester Dawe’s Granny Mary.

She ejaculated at sight of him, and Aunt Deborah looked up and bent her head to stare uncompromisingly above her spectacles.

“ ‘Ello, my lad, you’re back at last, then, ” said Granny Mary, drying red, stringy arms upon her coarse apron, while her glance searched his gipsy face, but would not meet the stare of her daughter-in-law. “ Well, what was it all about ? ”

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"Y' know very well what it was about, Granny!" said Aunt Deborah sharply. "It isna any use bein' deceitful about it!"

And Granny Mary actually blushed. "It wanna deceit so much, Deborah," she said, and there was ancient grief in her eyes. "It was my gel's money, an' I wanted to keep it as a surprise for the laddie's birthday."

Sylvester bent and kissed her. "And it is a surprise, Granny, a splendid surprise," he said happily.

"About a 'undred an' fifty, wanna it?" she asked, and would not meet their glances.

"And eight and six, Granny. . . . I never thought mother had money to leave."

"It was ur own, every penny, all on it. I got Lawyer Meecham to put it by for your twenty-fifth birthday, as I reckoned y'd 'ave more sense in the spendin' on it than when y' was twenty-one. 'Twas what ur saved up, for gettin' married with. . . ." She dabbed at her eyes, and bustled over to the kettle in an endeavour to keep her poise. "Deary me," she sighed plaintively.

Belle entered.

"Well, to tell the truth, I dunna like the way it's bin done, Granny, keepin' so close about it," said Aunt Deborah. "As if y' thought we should ha' robbed 'im on it. . . . Why couldn't y' tell me? 'Ere I've bin goin' about like a fool, wonderin' all sorts o' things about what scrape ae's bin gettin' into! I dunna think it was right on y', Granny. Not but what I'm glad on it," she ended grudgingly.

"So'm I, for Sylvie's sake," said honest Belle.

Her mother stared, as if suspecting the emendation. "You can get that dinner for the men," she said. "It's ready. Ask Gladys for it."

When Belle had gone: "You'll 'ave a pocketful of money for the first time in y' life, my lad," said Granny Mary, smiling happily upon him.

"Well, y' canna say I've kept 'im any shorter than I've 'ad to, Granny," said Aunt Deborah with truth. "When they was at the grammar school I always med a p'int o' keepin' both Jack's and Sylvie's pocket-money,



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whatever else 'ad to be cut short. A 'undred an' fifty ! It's a terrible lot o' money. . . . An' badly needed, every penny on it."

The subtle change in Sylvester's face did not escape her sharp eyes. "There's such a mort o' things want doin'," she added.

There was a silence after this, so that the clatter of Gladys May's clogs in the kitchen and the wheezing of Gaffer John, the little old man in the inglenook, were plainly audible. Sylvester knew that his aunt's look rested tentatively upon him, and that from the fireside Granny Mary was casting furtive glances at both of them.

"Yes, it's a good thing," he said, rising from his chair with a deep sigh.

"It'll be a godsend," said Aunt Deborah, still retaining the note of interrogation in her voice. "Why, there's the reaper to be mended and the roof o' the byre to be done an' the stock—— Oh, there's a dozen things want doin' ! The farm's just needin' it, an' never no more than now. Nobody knows better than me. . . . Wheat that cheap from Ameriky that we ha' to gi'e it to the pigs ! It 'urts me to see God's good food wasted like that. . . . But that's the thing, Jack's poultry farm, if we can only get it goin'. I'm *sure certain* there's money in it. Dunna you think so ?" she asked of Sylvester.

He murmured non-committally, and stretched his tall young body, turning uncomfortably from her. He knew that her life had been one long struggle to make both ends meet, that she buoyed up the farm upon her own gaunt shoulders above the ocean of debts, and that always she had done so. And he realized, though not with full appreciation (for he was a selfish young man, who busied his imagination solely upon the intriguing subject of himself), the bitter struggle her married life had been, with an "easy-going" man for a husband, with an iron code of morals, and with a farm that slipped ever nearer the abyss of bankruptcy. He had never tried to guess what her life might have been had circumstances been more favourable to her.

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"It wants money, though, a poultry farm," mused Granny Mary.

"Course it does. That's just what we're short on," replied Aunt Deborah. "But now. . . ." She hesitated, her eyes upon her nephew.

He turned to the door that led to the bedroom floor. "Yes," he said vaguely, and discovered the poppy in his ear. Changing the subject with painful abruptness, he said: "I don't think I shall go up into the hayfield again this morning," he said. "I'll go and get changed. I—I've got a bit o' business to see to." And turning from her curious gaze, he opened the stair door and clumped off upstairs.

"I expect it's upset the poor laddie," said Granny Mary unsteadily. "I know it 'as upset *me* proper, that it 'as. That money . . . so long ago . . . an' ur pickin' out things in the shops to set up 'ouse with . . . my little gel——" And suddenly, leaning against the stolid shoulder of Gaffer John, she wept at the pain of the old wound.

Aunt Deborah went to her, and her hands clasped the quivering old shoulders with clumsy kindness. "Don't give way to it, Granny," she said, and her hard voice was less hard. "Everythin' will come right up there. God's will is best, if we could only see fur enough. Don't cry, now."

### 2

"Eh?" said Gaffer John suddenly. The red, puffing face, surrounded by a raying fringe of yellowish-white hair, was raised to the women, and two great ox eyes regarded them. He was an obstinate old man, who spoke on the average once each fortnight, and who snorted—snort and speech were usually contradictory—most intelligibly once each week. When rain fell, and the steaming valley held mortal danger for his asthmatical self, he crept furtively out, tub-bellied, with shuffling feet, and stood with head bared to the rain, until he was noticed and

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hastily retrieved. A foolish, obstinate, self-absorbed old man.

"What's ae talkin' about now?" asked Granny Mary, calling herself a "silly old mawkin," and regaining her composure. "What's the matter now?"

"Eh?" wheezed this old husband of hers, who had ridden his hunter and governed the farm autocratically in his day.

"What's the matter now?" she repeated indulgently.

His terrifying glance passed from her face to the fire, and back to her face again. "'As ae gorn?" he wheezed.

"Who? 'As who gone?"

"Eh?"

"Oh, y' silly owd man! Smoke y' pipe, an' let me 'ear no more about it! Y'd m'ither a dog's 'ind leg off!"

He opened his mouth, gasped, and wheezed out: "Ae ain't no good for a sodger."

"Who ain't?"

"Eh?"

"Who ain't no good for a sodger?"

He considered awhile, his eyes staring vacantly into her face. Then suddenly: "Ae ain't!" he wheezed provocatively.

"Who said ae was?" she replied, lighting a taper for his pipe and wiping a last tear from her cheek. "Y' know very well that it was Sylvie." She meditated telling him of the legacy from their dead daughter; but decided, with a sad shake of her head, that it was too late in the day to worry Gaffer about that black business of the past. Aunt Deborah was watching them, but with unseeing eyes, her tall, thin figure standing stiffly beside the table; she pulled at her lower lip, as her habit was when deep thought engaged her.

Gaffer heaved and wheezed again. "Ae ain't no good, any'ow!" he said with resentment.

"Oh, you're up to y'r old tricks again, are y', Gaffer Johnny!" she said patiently, as one would speak to a child. "Now light y' pipe, an' dunna bother y'r silly owd 'ead about things."

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He slowly raised his pipe, gasped again, and wheezed, "Ae *ain't*!" with an obstinate roll of his great head.

Then his mouth opened and slowly closed upon his pipe-stem. He rolled his glance back to the fire. He puffed three or four times, occasionally glancing in a slow, inquisitive manner at Granny Mary, who held the taper.

"No!" he said defiantly, blowing out smoke, and suddenly choked, so that Granny Mary had to pat his back.

He did not speak again for eleven days.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SENTIMENTAL DECISION

#### I

FIVE generations of Wintertons had inhabited the Old Manor Farm. The first of the line had been John Winterton, a well-to-do farmer from Pipe Ridware; the second John Winterton had been farmer, and became squire; the third was squire and gentleman-farmer; the fourth was the present Gaffer John, who had ridden to hounds and lived a drunken, reckless life, leaving the farm to shift for itself, and mortgaging the more valuable holdings when debts were pressing.

The fifth John Winterton was the present Farmer John, who had never escaped from the burden of his father's debts, and had now, at fifty, ceased to try. In his early manhood, it was understood, he had striven to retrieve the farm from debt, but with the coming of the democratic age, and the depreciation of his produce caused by taxes, and the policy of importing cheaper wheat from America, he had been robbed of whatever dignity he might have possessed, so that now he drifted in the wake of the farm, "an easy-going man," with a fondness for the bar-parlour of the Goat's Head. Questioned once about his farm he had replied, with a benevolent smile: "Oh, it will last my time out." And the burden of the farm fell upon the shoulders of a woman who was not a Winterton. Aunt Deborah was one of the Lacys, "chapel folk," and had been brought up by her lay-preacher father, John Wesley Lacy, in the strictest Nonconformist fashion. It may readily be guessed that her life with Farmer John had not been happy; his indifference to the welfare of the farm, and, above all, his indulgence in strong drink, were

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constant thorns in her side. Fortunately for the peace of the home he was a weak man, who might be bullied. Harried by this private source of grief, and forced to uphold the farm above its flooding debts, she had never lost her early grimness of demeanour; rather, advancing years made of her a harsh, unhappy woman, who was judged unkind.

Bessie Winterton, Granny's daughter, had been a comely country maid twenty-six years ago. When the older people spoke of her—which they did with lowered lids—they said that she was the "image" of plump Belle. She had made the inconceivable blunder of loving a gipsy. Since the birth of time farmer and gipsy, the earth-tied and the road-free, have been at hopeless enmity, for opposites, in the main—in spite of the magnet and meretricious paradox—mutually repel, if only because of the prevalence of narrow-mindedness and the scarcity of sympathetic imagination. So that when Sylvester Dawe's mother openly flouted her kind she met, first, opposition, and finally, after the birth of her "shameful" child and the disappearance of its father, with open and covert hostility. The finger of shame (that is never sharper than when it is a blunt country finger) had been pointed at the heart-broken young mother. Granny Mary, though inwardly condemning the mad liaison, had fought like a Roman mother for her daughter's happiness. Gaffer John, her father, reaching up from the depths of his good-old-English-gentlemanliness, had solemnly cursed her upon the hearthstone where now he sat and dreamed. Her brothers, Farmer John and Farmer James, had helped as much as brothers might help in such circumstances, their attitude a mixture of silent condemnation of their sister and impotent wrath at her seducer; and her sister-in-law had stood in grim silence, aloof from the soiled, shameful one. Between her father and the village gossips the girl's spirit was broken. Women took the opinion of the world too seriously in those days. This one did, and forsook child and life for the kindly grave.

So came Sylvester Dawe into the world, the only salvage from a wrecked life, and found parental care from

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Granny Mary, Aunt Deborah and Farmer John. On her death-bed his mother had pleaded that he be christened by the gipsy's Christian name, and Granny Mary had given him the father's surname as a kind of protection. He grew up unconscious of his losses and shortcomings, and even when he could realize the colour of his illegitimacy it worried him not a whit. The shame was too remote to touch him; its atmosphere was swept clean away by time's brush, and his personal application of it to himself was too faintly, remotely poignant for satisfactory self-commiseration. He read in old books—for he was a great reader—how that illegitimate sons were spurred by their shame to commit revengeful crimes, but he remained unmoved by their example. He wondered whether the books were false, or whether he himself was too coarsely moulded to feel a proper shame. And having a healthy egoism he rightly accepted the former reason for his apathy towards his birth-branding.

### 2

He mounted the creaking stairs that led to the bedroom floor. A narrow corridor ran the full length of the rear of the house, its windows looking out over the courtyard and stables to Bluebell Wood upon the hill beyond the Home Field. There were three bedroom doors upon this corridor, which turned at right angles at each end to run upon the inside of the two short wings (in each of which was a bedroom), and ended in blind corners lit by small windows.

His bedroom was in the right wing, above the scullery, and behind the wall that bore the chimney excrescence and the fruitless espalier plum. He entered this pleasant, plainly furnished room, and mounted a short ladder that led through a trap-door to the den under the tiles, a den he shared with Jack. He had made and erected the ladder with his own big hands, and the den, which had been an apple-room in the old days, bore witness to the adolescent activities of the young men. It was really a

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quaint attic, rendered 'quainter by its use. Two of its walls leaned inwards, following the configuration of the roof; beams mysteriously crossed the whitewashed walls; and other than the trap-door there was no means of ingress. But the attic had two overwhelming advantages above all the other rooms in the house: it belonged exclusively to the two young men, and so was not subject to visitations from the women-folk, and it was ill-lit from the north by the window in the roof, which, when propped open by the bean-stick kept especially for that purpose, served to give Sylvester his much-desired "north light" for his painting. A tall easel stood in the only place where it *would* stand, near the back wall, but fortunately in that position it received a flood of light from the roof window. Upon one side of the den stood a small oak table, obviously only half its original size, for one half was supported by a crate; it bore a wooden box of paints, a gaudily daubed palette, whose outlines, like the outlines of the easel, were amateurish, pots containing brushes, and soiled, corked bottles of linseed oil and turpentine. For Sylvester Dawe took his painting seriously. Upon the other side of the room was an old oak chest with wrought-iron hasps, inside which were stored the many school books Sylvester and young Jack had used at the grammar school, and above the chest were four long shelves packed to overflowing with cheaply bound books. In the middle of the room were a deck-chair and a tall stool. Canvases and frames were hung and stacked wherever space offered, and served, with pipe-racks and scattered books and papers and boxing-gloves and a double-barrelled gun, to give the den a pleasant air of untidiness. A cheap oil-lamp provided light, and a cheap oil-stove heat.

But upon the broken surface of one of the white-washed walls was painted a figure that drew the eye at the first glance. Three-quarter life-size, tawdry and flamboyant in the sunlight that filled the little room, a painted figure stood in careless posture, hands on hips, legs negligently crossed, back leaning against a gatepost. Sylvester had painted in his own face, but had added a



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large moustache, and flecks of silver to the curling black hair. The figure was more successful than any other of the painter's essays; it was dark and richly coloured, and obviously had been painted over many times. A red-and-white neckerchief was tied loosely about the brown, sinewy neck, the body bore a green velvet coat, and silver earrings hung from the ears. The whole figure seemed to start out alive from its shadows, to stare out insolently, breathing of crude romance and adventure. Behind the figure, upon a much smaller scale, but faint and patchy where damp had caused the whitewash to chip, was the fragmentary outline of a red and yellow caravan standing in what appeared to be a bosky dingle.

This was Sylvester Dawe's romantic—and probably completely wrong—conception of his legendary father. It was to this figure that he turned at last. On first entering the room he closed the trap-door, deeming privacy essential. Then he stood up and surveyed the room with the kind of happy recognition one sees in the eyes of a man who has been long absent from his household gods. He hurried across to open the roof window, and the room became alive with his presence. Standing there, with the warm July sunlight falling broadly upon his gipsy head, he enjoyed in secret the thought of his legacy. Glad smiles lurked in his eyes; he muttered half-words, and swung his arms with a new freedom; he had the appearance of a man who has lately set down a heavy burden. Then he stretched himself, inspiring deeply, and suddenly his muscles became tense and rigid in the ecstasy of his delight. He was uplifted, borne up by a great relief.

He sighed happily, and turning, sauntered about the room, touching brushes and pictures and books with a loving forefinger. Then he plumped down into the deck-chair, and laughed silently to himself, like a maniac. He took out his wallet of money, and gloated openly upon the crisp bundle of money. His fingers fumbled with his cherry-wood pipe and a pouch of cheap tobacco. And it was then that his eye was caught by the eyes of the painted figure upon the opposite wall.

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He suddenly became intent. The eyes of the painted figure seemed to flash a message, an urge; always they had urged him, but never with their present insistence. The whole face seemed to beam, to insist, to assure him. He knew every line of light, every touch of colour, by heart, as he knew "The Reapers" and "The Angelus" and "Madame Recamier" and others of his copies; but at this moment so transfigured seemed the painting to his excited senses that it appeared to live in new, strange life, starting up into breathing existence beneath the driving impulse of the emphasis of its message.

He smiled reassuringly upon the figure. There was no need for its insistence. His decision was already made. He would take the road, as his father had done before him, and as he himself had so often wished to do. The money would last a long time. And afterwards? . . . His brows fell. He could never return to this life of drab slavery. No, while the opportunity was within his reach he must grasp it, grasp it fiercely, so that he need never again know the soulless misery of farm labouring. His glance rested upon his pictures. Yes, of course. *There* was the solution. He must paint, paint successfully, so that riches and favour should be his. Thank God for the chance. This legacy. . . .

It came like a personal gift from his dead mother, and he speculated upon her shadowy figure as he had never done before. He knew very little about her. Granny Mary's occasional wistful references suggested that she had been an angel. Aunt Deborah's tongue allowed to escape a few details that were scarcely more satisfactory; his mother, he gathered, had been irresponsible from childhood, had not been chastised sufficiently in her girlhood, had been denied the efficacy of a week's imprisonment chained to a bed, as girls of like perverseness were imprisoned; her downfall had been predicted to a nicety by obscure relatives now deceased, and in consequence of this tit-bit of information he had seen his mother walking under a kind of doom.

But beside that great, flamboyant father of his she was a figure too vague for speculation. She had always

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been merely a figure, but the father was a person, a person of rank and buoyant appeal. Of his father, curiously enough, he knew more. The original Sylvester Dawe had been a man of about thirty-five. He had possessed a caravan and other desirable attributes. He had worn a green velvet jacket, a broad-brimmed hat and massive ear-rings of pure silver. He had been hail-fellow-well-met with everybody. He had argued with everybody, and had smacked his mouth over his rich words. He was a creature of many songs and bold braggadocios, who had a trick of casting down his great hat upon inn tables and, in the full tide of flooding argument, smashing it vehemently in with his clenched fist. How much of this was true, and how much was the product of his son's sentimental imagination, it is impossible to say. His teeth were white—"probably false, and certainly stole," Aunt Deborah said illogically—and he walked jauntily, "like a tipsy lord," they said. He made and sold pegs and bass brooms for a living—"when ae wasna stealin'," said Aunt Deborah—and he travelled the road without kith or kin.

The son was not ashamed of his gipsy father. Rather, he was proud of him, and when he remembered his gipsy blood he swaggered and cocked his pipe and looked bold. He had copied his father in every known detail, except where his keen sense of the ludicrous had barred him. In his mind he had provided the legendary father with many delightful traits. Had his father only painted, the picture would have been perfect. For from some source Sylvester had received a desire to paint in oils. He had painted in his teens as other boys smoked, furtively, but with exquisite delight. Both Sylvester and Young Jack had won scholarships at the Ruggenham Grammar School, but their scholarships were for periods of two years only, so that by the time they had glimpsed the wonder and the beauty of learning they were turned out of the grammar school, Sylvester to spend one year in farm labouring before the war claimed him for four years, Young Jack, who took his scholarship two years later, leaving the school to find himself saddled with an insolvent farm.

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Since the return of Sylvester from France, in 1919, the cousins had worked side by side in the fields, reading much at night, and planning futile plans for the prosperity of the farm. And Sylvester had recommenced his painting, his love of colour increasing. By long concentration the original enthusiasm had grown to an overmastering desire, as enthusiasms will when the soil is suitable, and he was resolved to paint, so that he might win wealth and ease, and so that the world would acclaim his work. For beside being a very selfish young man he was a very vain young man. And the resolve was hardening now towards the formation of that crystal jewel that men call genius.

But from the composition and treatment of the many pictures that were about him one might doubt whether the jewel would ever form. The composition was non-existent; the colours were crude and unclean; the whole treatment, in fact, was amateurish and conventional. His unfinished pictures were least offensive; the finished ones were tragically over-worked. The idea was generally absent, and skimmed when included. The trees were dead and hard of outline. The grass came from a tube. Even the skies were impossible; Venice knows no blue like the blue of his skies, and their incongruous white clouds were podgy and clipped. He rarely painted sombre skies, and in most of his pictures one might see his craving for the sun and the rank beauty of the South, a craving expressed in Venetian scenes, tropic beaches, sunny hill towns of the Midi, and bright café crimsons and greens and yellows of Paris. His heart was in the South, and he chose his copies at the dictates of his heart; but his great feet had been forced to accustom themselves to the wet clay of this sink-pot of eastern Staffordshire. Maybe this was why his painting failed. He had had few holidays, and his solitary trip abroad had taken him to the Flanders quagmire. It might be that his contemplated trip to France would help him. It is probable that a course of study with the art master at the Walsall Institute of Art would have helped him more. But there was nothing romantic about the Walsall Institute of Art. And like every young man who has lived off the beaten track of the

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world, he was a sentimental *poseur*, fleeing the prosaic like the devil.

France! . . . Spain! . . . Italy! . . .

The names were alluring music in themselves. He was eager to breathe the foreign air and see the foreign sights, eager to picture his handsome self before the sunlit background of the South. He saw himself . . . in France. There was a great, white sunbeaten highway lined with poplars, and he saw himself, from the rear, striding steadily on, a song on his lips; he saw a little hill town of white walls and red roofs, where, in an old cool square beyond the hot embrace of the sun, he drank of old sweet wines that were themselves redolent of earth and sun. He saw other scenes, too, other vain imaginings, and always he occupied the centre of the scene: the forest of Fontainebleau, where he sat painting with his artist friends (alas, vain dream!); he was being feasted in Paris—in Montmartre!—on the success of his great picture. And again, he stood out black and romantic and mysterious against a yellow moon, while an ardent French face, the face of a beautiful girl, was pressed upwards to him, while lips divinely to be desired spoke passionately, tempestuously of love, enveloping him in their voluptuous desire until the moment passed into the eternity of a kiss. France! . . . The land of beauty and colour and desire, the land where men lived and loved and enjoyed without end, where Romance walked naked among men! . . . England? . . . England would be like kissing one's sister in comparison. . . .

Of course, there had been subtle repressions that were partly responsible for his decision. Many young men have dreamed like dreams, but few have reached such a sentimental decision, even with the opportunity given. Young Jack, Sylvester's twenty-year-old cousin, had suffered from similar repressions, had dreamed his dreams and mused long hours upon the working of internal combustion engines; but he had put by his dreams of becoming a mechanic and riding at Brooklands and winning the Tourist Trophy races in the Isle of Man, and had set himself to the prosaic task of saving the farm from ruin.

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The difference must be sought in the parentage of the young men, and, of course, the part that mood played. Sylvester Dawe was half-poet, half-lout, and the money came to him when the poet half was uppermost. At times the poet burned in him, as when he forgot his farm duties and went off for the duration of days upon the high road with the maddening unrest of spring and the awakening world in his feet. But at other times (and oftener, it seemed, as he grew older) the farm labourer predominated, and he became a clod, vapid, worthless, dragging clumsy, argumentative feet through all the finer issues and saner visions of his life. He was known in the village as a free talker and swearer; he would not let you speak, but must ever confide. A young man whose flirtations were notorious; a braggart, too, who would even have you believe, when he was drunk, that he would be famous some day because of his little pictures in oil-colours, he who was fit for nothing except singing his own praises and playing fast and loose with the girls. They considered that he was wild, that even Aunt Deborah could not tame him. ("You never saw Young Jack in a pub. or fooling about with gels, did y'?" they asked.) In the war he had strutted about the village in his khaki as if he had been a captain or "summat." And when he came back, wounded in the leg, the girls had been as bad as he was himself. This was the masculine opinion, of course, and the opinion of the older women. Had they but known, the Crawford girls merely played at love with him; they flirted with him, not soberly, with an eye to a home and a baby, but with an exhilarating sense of daring. As a husband he was not too acceptable; he was too selfish, too alien, too free with his kisses. But as a rather risky lover he had an indubitable appeal.

France it was to be, then. He briefly, and with distaste, scanned alternative ways of spending his money. He might marry Marion Briscoe, who would accept him at once were he to propose, and the idea had a certain charm. But marriage! And farming for the rest of his life! (He grimaced.) Jack's poultry farm? If, as Jack so fondly imagined, the venture was destined to save the

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farm, then the hundred and fifty pounds would be an invaluable asset. But his brow grew dark as he thought of Aunt Deborah, the poultry farm and his legacy. . . . No, he himself must have the spending of his money, the happiness that it would bring. Why should he share? It was *his*, to spend as he liked.

No, he was for France. He smiled upon his cherry-wood pipe, and then at the painted figure on the wall. The road called, and fame called, and all the great, busy world called, as it had called to him throughout his youth, to come up out of the mud into the busy streets, where young men strove to realize ideals and ambitions. How *he*, that great coloured father of his, would have rejoiced at the decision. He regretted the twenty-five years of silence that lay between them (a silence never to be broken on earth), and wished, almost with grief, that the painted figure could stand forth in all its breathing, many-coloured life, if only for a moment. But the painted figure was mute; joyous, but a dream.

He rose, and with a face full of purpose began to pack his paints in preparation for his departure. And, of course, he must take his Murger. Yes, it was to Montmartre he would go first, to steep himself in the artist's atmosphere. And he must take his tiny French dictionary that he had carried with such little purpose all through the war years. And he would have to get photographs for a passport, and—oh, there were a hundred things to do.

It had not been in vain, then, all that long dreaming, all that eager planning.

It seemed as if he had been guided.

### 3

"Morning, Sylvie," cried Young Jack, when Sylvester descended to the kitchen, where the family was gathered about the mid-day meal of boiled fat bacon, potatoes and beans. "I hear you've come into a fortune!"

They grinned across the table at each other and shook

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hands warmly. Jack looked excited, Sylvie thought. That poultry farm——

"Well, lad, I'm glad on it," said Farmer John, offering an immense, pale fat hand from the head of the table. "Money's ne'er bin so plentiful, and it'll come in 'andy-like, that it will."

"Yes, it'll be very useful if it's spent careful, that's true," Aunt Deborah said in her strong, irritating way. "An' nobody can deny it."

"I dunna know when money wasna useful, mother," said Farmer John, and chuckled at his wit. He was a stout, burly backed man, with an asthmatical wheeze, like Gaffer John, and he walked with his head pushed back in order to balance his great paunch upon his spindle legs. He looked like a man who would have been a bad bully had his spirit been stronger; as it was he was weak and genial. "I can always find a use for it!"

Granny Mary said nothing, but turned her old blue eyes towards her plate. Young Jack scanned Sylvester's sombrely burning face, and then sighed furtively; he was a slighter, shapelier young man than Sylvester, and handsome enough in an honest, workaday fashion, but sometimes he marred his pleasant face by putting on his mother's grim look. Suddenly he inspired and asked, in a curious tone: "What shall you do with it, then, Sylvester?"

A silence came to the table.

"Do with it——?" began Sylvester, collecting his forces.

"Do with it?" sharply interrupted Aunt Deborah, surprise at the question in her grim face. "What can he do with it besides what we know?"

But she was not alarmed.

Granny Mary looked up from her plate and said, in trembling, tentative daring: "And what *will* y' be doin' with it, lad?"

He glanced fleetingly at their faces, which were raised simultaneously at the unusual repetition of the question. "I'm thinking of having a little trip—a little holiday—somewhere," he said. "France, I think."



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A silence more complete than the first here descended upon them, and he was conscious that only his knife and fork worked.

"What?" said Aunt Deborah at last.

"Haw! haw!" laughed Farmer John, seeing something amusing in the reply, and tugging at the tow-coloured side-whiskers that were set so foolishly upon his red cheeks. "Why not Ameriky, lad?"

But Aunt Deborah waited impatiently for his explanation.

"I'm off to France as soon as I can get my passport through. . . . Not so easy to go as it used to be!" he ended, chuckling weakly.

"But——?" began Belle.

"France, Sylvie——?" began Young Jack.

"What for?" interrupted Aunt Deborah, her voice cutting grimly into their young voices.

He moved his shoulders in a clumsy shrug. "Well, what do you go on holiday for?" he asked, still trying to take the matter lightly.

"I 'anna 'ad one, so I dunno!" she said tartly.

No one spoke for a moment. Gaffer John, after finishing his dinner in the inglenook, began to wheeze prodigiously.

"He wants to enjoy himself, course," said Belle, greatly daring.

"And paint," he added.

"Paint?"

"Yes."

"But you can paint in England, 'ere?" Aunt Deborah said reasonably.

"Yes. . . . But I want a holiday, too."

"'Course," said Belle bravely. "You want to see fresh places before you can paint more pictures."

"Oh, I see!" said Farmer John, in the tone of one who suddenly sees through a black fog.

"You be quiet!" said Aunt Deborah to her daughter. "You dunna know what you'm talkin' 'bout! This is a matter for older 'eads than yourn!" Then, to Sylvester: "An' 'ow much is it goin' to cost?"

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"Oh, I shall have enough. I shall just go on until—well, as long as it lasts," he replied.

She thought of the farm, of debts, of the ceaseless struggle of a generation to bolster up the decrepit holding; she thought concretely, of Harrison, the rent-man, of the tax-collector's unmistakable envelopes, of Belle's scanty wardrobe—and of a certain cretonne costume that was now much too short for the girl—of the two cows that had been buried in Bluebell Wood during the epidemic, and of the two bedridden Misses Robinson, who had lately missed their weekly present of five shillings. . . . These things and many more occurred to her mind, and then she remembered Jack's poultry farm, the most important of all.

"It's a wicked waste o' good money!" she said; and at once the atmosphere of the dark little kitchen changed. "No"—as Farmer John would protest—"I must speak me mind! An' it is wicked! An' if it isna shameful waste, then call me a fool!" None had the temerity to do so. "Paint? What'll *you* ever paint? . . . But it isna the paintin'! . . . A sink of iniquity!" she ended, in hot, outraged tones.

"Oh come, mother——!" began Young Jack, feeling the position keenly, for he knew that Sylvie would divine that she wanted the money for the poultry farm.

"Don't answer me!" she cried.

Sylvester stared, uncomprehending. "What do you mean?" he asked, looking sullen.

"Women an' wine! Women an' wine, that's what I mean!" she replied, the red blood in her hard face. And everybody shuffled uncomfortably. "If y'mother 'ad knowed about it, y'wouldna ha' 'ad a penny!"

"That's not for you to say, Deborah," Granny Mary gently reproved her.

"If I dunna, nobody else will!"

A painful pause followed. He kept his eyes turned towards his plate, eating he knew not what, the hot, close reek of the potatoes in his nose. Truth to tell, he was not unaware that he was playing rather a poor part in the scene, but he would not pierce down to the word

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"selfishness." He set himself obstinately to withstand all that Aunt Deborah might say. Who had more right to the spending of his money than he? He did not see that it was not a question of rights.

"What did you want me to do with it, then?" he asked hypocritically.

"What should I ha' done with it? Or Granny? Or Jack? Or anybody? . . . Ask y'self!" she replied, the irritating note predominant in her voice.

He looked up at her, a fleeting glance, and saw that the little nerve near the corner of her mouth was twitching, as it did when she was angry. "If you mean that I ought to put it in the farm . . . it would be throwing good money after bad," he muttered clumsily.

Farmer John blenched at the thrust. Young Jack looked down at his plate. Aunt Deborah snorted in miserable indignation.

"'Course, it's Sylvie's money, mother," said Jack. And in spite of her hard stare, he continued: "It's nothing to do with us how he spends it."

"That's right, my lad," said Farmer John approvingly, blowing out a great blast of air from his horse-nose. His pale blue, pleasant, feckless eyes, so incongruous in such a red, bluff face, took a far-away look into the bar of The Goat's Head, and he saw the questions and answers, and his modest talk of "my nephew in Paris, learnin' to paint," and the increased deference that would be accorded him. "'Tis the lad's money, after all, an' it ae wants a 'oliday, why, it's for 'im to say."

Sylvester gave him a grateful glance.

"An' who's goin' to keep the farm goin' while ae gads off on this fool's errand?" asked Aunt Deborah in a beaten voice. "The 'ay not got in, all the roots wantin' cleanin', sheep got to be dipped, and the corn crop a'most ready for gettin'? Who's goin' to do the work?"

"Oh, I can look after the farm, mother," said Young Jack casually, though he was sick with disappointment at the loss of Sylvester's money and of Sylvester's help and companionship, which would have meant so much in the

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coming months. And the number of times Sylvester and he had talked about their plans for the saving of the farm, and outlined enthusiastically what they would do if they had money! "Sylvester mustn't worry about the farm."

"Can I come in?" called a weak, ingratiating voice from the door, the voice of one who battles bravely against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Belle snorted.

The cadaverous, toothless face that had been peering round the door here smiled, and Miss Sally Twitten, whom Aunt Deborah had "saved for the Lamb," came into the room. She was a tall, gaunt, untidy, middle-aged woman with a blowsy look and many ailments; she always carried a mysterious handbag of black netting lined with shirting, and she was known to discover scandal in the mysterious way in which the vulture discovers a carcass.

"'Ow are y' all?" she asked, glancing keenly about the diners and the dinner. "What, kidney beans a'ready?"

"Yes. Come and sit down, Sally," said Aunt Deborah, remarkably indifferent to her gossip's coming.

"Well, I was on'y just a-sayin' to Mrs. Fowler as that was just what I could do with!" exclaimed Sally, her little eyes dancing in her plaintive face. "Kidney beans are my favourite! I never know when I've 'ad enough! Are you the same?" she asked of the glowering Belle.

"Gladys, bring Miss Twitten a plate," said Aunt Deborah drearily.

"What, for me?" cried Sally. And then over her face came what Belle described as her "poorly look." "I dunna know whether I dare, y'know." She sighed, her eyes still scanning the company, her brain awork to discover the cause of their curious gloom. "The doctor said as 'ow I 'adna to eat nothin' with starch in it. An' d'y' know? There's over eighty-three per cent. o' starch in kidney beans! They might be good for my poor kidneys, though. Kidney beans an' kidneys!" She

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laughed out in a shrill falsetto, and old Gaffer John jumped in the inglenook, and then weightily scanned the windows for signs of a disturbance. "Well, since you *are* so pressin', I *will* 'ave a bit. . . . I've got a nice little rabbit I'll let y' 'ave cheap, Mrs. Winterton. I give ninepence for 'im, but I'll let y' 'ave im for eightpence," she said, between huge mouthfuls of kidney beans. She bent and searched in her bag, bringing out a poor little frightened rabbit as big as a small rat. "Nice an' plump! Just right for Gaffer's supper. I wanted it meself, but y'know, I darena touch rabbit, what wi' my stomach bein' in the state it is. All sore, like. An' 'ard." She tapped the table. "Like that."

"Well, I've got a bit of business to attend to," said Sylvester, rising in relief.

"Yes, I expect you'll be busy enough now, lad," said Granny Mary, rising and reaching up to arrange his best black tie (for he had changed into his Sunday clothes). She desired a kiss, but he did not understand. Her old hands, worn out in his service, ceased their fumbling and dropped patiently into her lap.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Miss Twitten, with goggling eyes, ceasing for a moment her trencher work upon the beans.

Nobody answered for a moment, while Belle looked daggers. "Oh, it's nothin'," said Aunt Deborah at last.

"Well, I'll go," said Sylvester awkwardly. "I shan't be long." He had decided to go into Ruggenham to buy a travelling outfit and to consult people about train services and passports.

Aunt Deborah's wrathful glance followed his broad back as he left the kitchen. "It's a sin!" she said in bitter anger as the door closed upon him. "An' goes clatterin' on' without stoppin' for grace!" She pushed away her plate with her forearm, sighing heavily in defeated fashion.

"What, not *rice*?" said Miss Twitten incredulously, her eye upon the pudding dish that Gladys May had brought to table, her ears cocked for stray words of illumination.

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"Don't you want some pudding?" Belle asked timidly of her mother.

"Me?" said Miss Twitten. "Oh, I beg pardon; I thought you meant me!"

"Mother," coaxed Belle, a wrathful shoulder turned upon the visitor. "Have a bit, do!"

"No," replied Aunt Deborah. "I dunna want nothin'." And she gazed drearily at the fire, her calloused hand tugging at her lower lip.

The motor-cycle engine roared into startled life beneath the foot of Sylvester, the sound drumming on the panes. For a moment it roared away, while Aunt Deborah's face grew darker. Then there was a metallic clank of gear-wheels, and the noisy passage of the combination down the drive.

The sound died, and Gaffer's wheezing took up its age-old tale.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE THRESHOLD OF ADVENTURE

#### I

DURING the next fortnight of unrest Sylvester Dawe found many necessary preparations to hinder his departure. He had few visits of farewell to make; all his old loves were engaged or married, and Marion Briscoe, his present love, must needs wait until the night before his departure before he bade his romantic farewell of her. He would tell her of his love, and she would promise to wait until he came back rich and famous from his quest, he decided. It would be quite like the story-books.

His passport arrived upon the Saturday morning following two weeks after his receipt of the legacy. Upon the previous night Granny Mary came to him in his bedroom, and suggested that he should give to Jack a share of the money. Coming from such a quarter one could not easily refuse, and he promised her that he would give Young Jack fifty pounds before he departed on Monday. He would have gone on Sunday, but Aunt Deborah cried down the idea; it was God's day, for one thing, when men should neither work nor travel; and, besides that, the relatives of the family were coming to tea, in obedience to custom, to say farewell.

After dinner on Sunday there was a great coming and going between the kitchen and the parlour across the hall, and by four o'clock all preparations were made for the reception of the guests. The kitchen table was graced by a cloth of dull crimson, and all the hard, uncomfortable furniture was spotless. Gaffer John (who, of course, had refused to don Sunday attire), alone marred

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its inhuman air of order. And in the parlour the linen covers had been taken off the apple-green suite and the decrepit harmonium, and upon the table, neatly disposed about the best table-cloth, were the Wedgwood tea service, lates of bread and butter and fancy cakes and slices of seed-cake and dishes of golden jelly and pink blanc-mange and tinned peaches, while in the centre was placed a vase of pretty, fragile, puce schizanthus that Mrs. Briscoe had sent from her greenhouse.

Sunday clothes were the rule, of course, and Farmer John was doing penance in an ill-fitting suit of shiny black, while sighing secretly for his tweed three-quarter coat and cord breeches, and for his comfortable neckcloth in place of his starched collar. Aunt Deborah, immaculate and forbidding in black gaberdine, with tiny white cuffs and collars, and a locket at her flat breast, moved here and there admonishing Gladys May, and making her last dispositions. She had bought a cigar for her husband to smoke after tea; she was anxious to preserve the fiction of well-being from the over-inquisitive eyes of the relatives.

"There, that's fit for the marquis's table!" exclaimed Granny Mary, coming into the kitchen and placing upon the dull crimson cloth a jug creaming over with sweet country roses. She wore black gaberdine, like Aunt Deborah, and her tiny cream collar was fastened by a brooch bearing the scroll "Mary"; this had been a present from Gaffer John when he had been a gay gallant in the morning of time. "You'll miss the roses in France, lad!"

He looked up, coatless, from his ceaseless study of the French dictionary, and nodded like a hypocrite. His heart was impatient to go. "I expect I shall, granny, many a time," he said. And moved by the thought of his going he added with unwonted warmth: "And other things, too, I expect."

At this word Granny Mary turned from him, and bent over the roses she was arranging. They sensed that she was quietly weeping, but for a moment no one moved or spoke. At the end of the uncomfortable silence Aunt



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Deborah touched her on the shoulder and said : "There, granny, dunna fret. You'll be all upset when they come."

Silence came again, and Sylvester moved uneasily in his seat. Then, staring awkwardly at his hands, he ventured : "Come, granny, don't get worrying yourself like this. I shan't be gone long."

"I dunna know why on earth you're goin', if you ask me!" said Aunt Deborah angrily, discovering the depth of resentment that lay beneath her gloomy silence of the past fortnight. He sighed, and turned back to his dictionary. Granny Mary wiped her old eyes, and withdrew, uncomforted, to help Gladys May in the scullery.

At this moment Belle cried out from the window that Granny Phyllis and Mr. Redfin and Aunt Martha were coming. Aunt Deborah moved to her daughter's side and scanned the occupants of the gig that was rumbling up the drive, while Belle waved and smiled at the little old lady, the stout, unhealthy looking younger woman, and the little wisp of a man, the first arrivals.

"Another brown suit!" grunted Aunt Deborah, her eye upon the chest of her little brother-in-law. "As if ae could afford black if anythin' was to happen to the old lady!" For Abbott's Crawford chose its clothes with an eye to possible eventualities. "I declare ae gets smaller, an' I'm sure certain that bowler's never 'ad a brush on it since ae was 'ere at Christmas!"

Belle scurried out into the yard, for to-day was one of her rare holidays, and returned with the little old lady upon her arm. Aunt Deborah, Granny Mary and Farmer John went forward to meet the new-comer, for Granny Phyllis was a woman of strong personality. Sylvester shuffled into his coat.

"Well, mother, an' 'ow are y'?" asked Aunt Deborah, bending to kiss the keen, hatchet face with its sharp black eyes and toothless, working gums. "Feelin' tired after y' ride, I'll be bound. Now you just come an' sit down an' rest y'self."

"H'mph!" snorted Granny Phyllis, with surprising vigour, her face lifting, her eyes flashing. "An' 'ow long's it bin since I've bin too old to ride a couple o'

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miles wi'out gettin' knocked up, eh? Y'talk as if I was Methusalem, our Deb! But I'll let y'know, my gel, and King George upon 'is throne, that I'm good for a ten-mile walk *any* day, let me tell y'." And she stretched herself up in her muff and bonnet and shawl and glared and nodded upon them like a grisly, black-eyed little apparition.

"Now, granny, none o' that hoity-toity!" cried privileged Belle. "Let me take your things off, and just you sit down and be a good girl, or you shan't come to the party!"

Granny Phyllis turned, and suddenly smiled a horrible, toothless smile upon the girl. "You're the best o' the lot on 'em, our Belle!" she said. And then, moved by some quick prompting, she turned to Sylvester. "What's this daft nonsense I've bin 'earin' about *you*, young man?" she demanded. "France, is it? Gaddin' off an' wastin' y' money like that, eh?"

He smiled, knowing the kindness that lay behind the sharp words, but feeling some embarrassment at the question. "Yes, granny, I'm off to France in the morning. Paris," he replied, and was conscious of the gloomy silence that had fallen upon the family. "I'm taking the chance while I've got it."

Aunt Deborah pulled at her lower lip, but refrained from comment, for she would not betray her disappointment, and its inference of financial difficulty, before this relative of hers.

"And why France?" snapped Granny Phyllis.

"Oh—I don't know," he replied. "I've read a lot about it, and it's nearest. . . . 'Course, I didn't see much of it in the war. But Paris must be a wonderful city, I should think."

Granny Phyllis snorted, and one was reminded of her daughter, Aunt Deborah. "Wonderful fiddlesticks!" she said. "Nothin' but a lot o' frogs; an' the women worse. No *body* in 'em! . . . Like flat ale!"

But here Aunt Deborah's sister, Aunt Martha, a stouter woman than her sister, with a weak, unhealthy face and a flabbiness of tissue, came into the room,

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followed by her husband, Mr. Samuel Redfin, whose head barely reached the level of her shoulder. He was small and thin, with bowed legs, about which the ends of his trousers lay in folds; his face was small and unremarkable, with reddened, roughened skin, a pointed, ferrety nose, and a great, down-brushed moustache, of which he was inordinately proud; a tiny wisp of tow-coloured hair was larded in a flat curl on his brow, while conspicuously stitched upon the breast of his new brown waistcoat were the ribbons of his war medals, which included the D.C.M. He had a squeaky voice, carried himself with an air of authority, and burrowed his ferrety nose continually into the affairs of others. How this incredible pair had become joined in holy matrimony no one really knew. He had been a cowman at the Hill Farm before the war, and after returning to his post in 1919 he committed the astounding act of leading Aunt Martha to the altar, to the mingled horror and indignation of the family. Perhaps—who knows?—deep within the sluggish breast of Aunt Martha the war had struck some hidden chord that glorified the returned warrior. But she alone of all the family saw him in this light. He was regarded by the rest as a relative by stealth, a man who had basely betrayed his trust. His mother-in-law, Granny Phyllis, spoke of him to his face as “a little tuppenny-ha’penny push-nose,” while Aunt Deborah consoled the family, after the unnatural event, with the remarks that “God’s ways were passing strange at times,” and that “trials come to test us.” Mr. Redfin went on his way unperturbed by their remarks; his roughened skin was too thick to be lightly pierced. He was called “Mr. Redfin” by the family in order to keep his curious status always before their minds.

“Ello everybody!” he said, stroking his over-size moustache in affected joviality. “An’ ’ow’s everybody? All alive an’ kickin’, an’ as large as life, eh?”

They shook hands with him, Aunt Deborah very coolly; and, a little sheepishly, he sought Sylvester and young Jack, who, being men, could not feel the women’s rancour.

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"France, eh?" he said, seating himself between them upon the "squab," and stroking his little calf. A reminiscent smile played about his face, and the young men knew that they were destined to hear Mr. Redfin's inexhaustible war memories. "I wisht I was goin' with y', Sylvie me lad! Not teckin' the old hidentification number with y' this time, eh? He! He! . . . But y' want a pal on a stunt like that, I reckon. It's best to 'ave somebody by y'. . . Which part are you y' goin' to?"

"Paris."

"Paris?" His eyes opened, a humorous expression came into them, and he winked and blinked at Sylvester in a knowing manner. "Y' want to keep y' yed screwed on, then. Was y' ever in Paris in the war? . . . No, nor me. But I was in Rouen. An' Lord knows wheer I'd ha' bin if I 'adna kept my yed screwed on, my lad! Oh, they'm devils! Shall y' goo anywheer near the old spots? Anywheer near Vymy Ridge? That's wheer y' copped yours, wanna it?"

"Yes," said Sylvester. "No, I shan't go up there, I think."

"Oh, that's a pity. 'Cause if you 'ad, just as y' goo past the owd barn with one side crumped you'll see a bit of a knob—remember?—with two blasted pines——"

But here the sudden silence of the women-folk, who had been chattering about Granny Phyllis, caused Mr. Redfin to pause and look up.

"*Language!*" quoth Aunt Deborah angrily.

"It wanna. It was on'y innercent——!" he began.

"H'mph!" snorted Granny Phyllis fiercely. "You look innocent!" And Mr. Redfin quailed beneath the combined stare of the women-folk.

"'Ave y' got my bottle, Sammy?" murmured Aunt Martha weakly, patting her chest like an invalid and subsiding into a chair. Mr. Redfin rose with a face of alarm, took a large smelling-bottle from the pocket of his brown coat, and held it, uncorked, beneath the nose of Aunt Martha. Upon his face was now a solicitous smile.

Granny Phyllis, of whom he was in mortal terror, snorted like a horse, so that he nearly dropped the bottle.

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"Don't be a fool! Give it to ur, an' sit down out o' the way!" she said. "You're like a jumpin' flea about the place!"

Sylvester generously drew Mr. Redfin to the "squab," where the little man mopped his brow with a red-and-white handkerchief. There was a little silence; the family were not yet accustomed to the presence and position of Mr. Redfin.

"'Ave a fag?" he said, proffering a packet of Woodbines to the two young men beneath the eye of the women.

"Put 'em away . . . it's tea-time!" commanded Granny Phyllis.

At this moment the sound of wheels rescued poor Mr. Redfin from the public gaze, and soon Farmer James Winterton, Farmer John's brother, a burly man with a hard face and a bad reputation as a taskmaster (which he had inherited from Gaffer John), entered the kitchen, and was followed by his thin, shrewish wife, Aunt Kate. Hardly had these new-comers been greeted when Mrs. Briscoe, a handsome widow, a friend of the family, came in with her fair, shy daughter, Marion. The party was now complete, and Granny Mary went into the scullery to seek Gladys May and the teapot.

Chairs were found and ranged round the hearth in the kitchen, and the company sat and talked about the price of land and the price of stock at the Ruggenham auction last Tuesday, of the demands of farm labourers, and of the village fête that now approached. They stroked their chins and smoothed their Sunday clothes, and generally shook themselves down into the "company" atmosphere. And at last Gladys May put a fair, fluffy head round the door—a head that was a beacon to the young men of the village—and announced in a feeble whisper that "tea was on the b'il."

A move was made for the parlour.

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Here, after much self-conscious offering of chairs and more stroking of chins and twitching of Sunday skirts, the guests were accommodated round the table. Aunt Deborah, at the foot, bowed her head, and the company followed suit.

*"For what we are about to receive, O Lord make us truly thankful,"* she whispered.

"Amen," murmured the company, Granny Phyllis speaking in a loud "I-won't-be-thought-a-chapel-woman-if-I-do" manner. For, unlike her daughters Deborah and Martha, who followed in the steps of John Wesley Lacy, their father, Granny Phyllis stayed at home on Sundays, and was even known to spend the Sabbath in reading a light novel until the boy brought her her Sunday sheaf of murders and divorces.

Mr. Redfin coughed after the grace, and again drew the gaze of the company.

"Now, meck y'selves at 'ome!" cried Farmer John, rubbing one of his great outcurved ears, in which abode a tuft of tow-coloured hair. "You'm welcome to what we've got, so 'elp y'selves!"

And everybody began to ask everybody else to take bread and butter, and there were many murmured "After you's" and much courteous compromise to accommodate the polite. And then a choice of jelly or pink blanc-mange engaged the tongues and hands of the party, until at last, with everybody served and the inevitable lost spoon found, the way was open for small talk.

"What's this I bin 'earin', Sylvie?" asked Farmer James across the table. "Goin' to meck a bloomin' foreigner o' y'self, eh? But y'dunna mean it, surely?"

Sylvester assured him that he did.

Farmer James chuckled, contempt for Sylvester's mentality in his eye. "You'm really goin' to France to do nothin', just play about?" he asked incredulously.

"And paint," said Sylvester, wishing his relatives were non-existent.

Farmer James's wife, Aunt Kate, here shrugged her

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shoulders as if the subject were offensive. "I thought you'd bin brought up better nor that," she said.

"Why——?" he began.

"Oh, we *know* what France is!" she went on, her thin, shrewish face nodding so that her "bun" (as she called the thin knot of hair at the back of her head) danced itself loose. And her lips shot out the scolding words: "Women! *Bad* women! That's what it is, an' nowt else, if you ask me!"

"I didn't ask you," he said.

"What?"

The company held its breath. Sylvester was acutely conscious of the flush that had crept up into the wonderful fair face of Marion Briscoe at his side. He shrugged angrily.

"Damn!" said Mr. Redfin succinctly, endeavouring to perform (and unsuccessfully) a conjuror's trick of secreting a large piece of golden jelly up his sleeve. There were snorts and "Te! Te's!" and poor Belle choked with laughter, calling down the optical wrath of her mother upon her head. Mr. Redfin recovered the jelly, only to lose it finally beneath the table. The services of Gladys May were called in.

"Sammy!" murmured Aunt Martha, in a pained voice.

"Y' see——" began poor Mr. Redfin, thumb indicating Aunt Kate, who sat beside him.

"Sit down!" commanded Granny Phyllis. "You're up an' down like a cock at a fair! You want a bib and tucker on!"

"Don't bother. Sit down, Mr. Redfin!" said Granny Mary kindly, tears that followed laughter in her beautiful old eyes. "Gladys May will see to it."

"Ello, what's this? A party?" cried a voice at the door, and Sally Twitten entered and smiled ingratiatingly upon the company. "Oh, I wouldna ha' called for the world if I'd thought as there'd be company!"

"H'mph!" grunted Belle, beneath her breath.

"Come in, Sally, and 'ave a cup o' tea, do!" said Aunt Deborah warmly. She was invariably kind to her

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protégée, and in spite of her acumen in other directions she was curiously blind to Sally's duplicity. But others were not; covert shrugs and stealthy glances of unamiable surprise greeted Miss Twitten. "Here, sit by me, if y' can crush in, Sally."

Gladys May brought in another cup and saucer and plate, and finally the tea-pot, and wished (as she told her confidant, Nelly Kimberly, that night) "that the owd lad 'd fetch Sally Twitten," for fair, fluffy-haired Gladys May was a lazy young beauty.

Sally cast a wan glance at the tea-pot, and shook her head sadly. "I dunno whether I dare, y' know," she whispered in a faint voice. "My kidneys bein' so bad, an' the doctor a-tellin' me not to drink tea on no account."

"I think I should follow the doctor's advice, Sally," said Belle, with pardonable cruelty. Her mother glanced darkly across.

Sally looked startled. "Oh, I dunna expect a cup will kill me," she said, in a much more robust voice. "And any'ow"—she smiled upon the company like a martyr to friendship—"I'll drink a cup an' chanct it, let the consequences be what they will!"

Mr. Redfin, who had been eyeing her with the glad eye of mirthful recollection, here demanded: "'Ave y' got a chap yet, Sally?"

The family were effectually shocked at the vulgar, tactless question. Sally dropped her teaspoon and relapsed noisily into a flood of tears.

"Sally is to be congratulated, I think!" said Granny Phyllis, before Aunt Deborah could formulate an attack. "There are chaps *and* chaps, let me tell y'! And jumpin' nincompoops, too, for that matter!"

Aunt Martha sighed weakly. Mr. Redfin stroked his great moustache, and looked dolefully into his tea-cup. The talk turned to unhappy marriages, and later, after Sally's cup had been replenished three times, to kidney disorders and their cures, while Farmer John and his brother talked gravely of foot-rot and the nuisance of sheep-dipping, and Farmer John talked of sending a "down-calver" to the Ruggenham auction, and Farmer



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James eyed him and this admission of financial difficulties through shrewd, half-closed eyes.

Sylvester, placed with ostentatious casualness beside Marion at table, spoke little. Sometimes he would glimpse through the corner of his eye her grey eyes, that were always so cool and limpid, the cool heaven of her mouth, and the indescribable whiteness of her shoulder where the gold tissue of her Sunday dress had moved. But when he had helped her to seed-cake (which, by immemorial custom, is the last course), he whispered, beneath the gusty talk of the company: "You know that I'm going to-morrow, Marion?"

He had been waiting for her to refer to his departure, but her maddening unconcern at its proximity spurred on his desire for her subjection.

"Is it to-morrow?" she asked easily. She looked so calm, so virginally indifferent, that he moved in discomfort. "I thought you were going on Wednesday?"

Yet she did not show concern, he saw; she was probably masking her emotion. "No, my passport came through yesterday, so I'm off right away. I go on the eight-twenty," he said, attempting an equal indifference. And then: "There's nothing to wait for."

"No," she said. "It will be glorious, I should think. And now you will be satisfied, I hope, Sylvester. You're always talking about how you'd like to see the world. You're *not* taking a donkey?"

He smiled conventionally at this gibe at one of his dreams; his mind was shaping a question that would evoke admissions. But suddenly he found the eyes of the company upon him, and he awoke to the knowledge that Miss Twitten had asked him a question. Something about "fixed-up." . . .

"Pardon?" he said, and noticed Marion's cheek flush.

"Sally!" said Aunt Deborah warningly to her gossip.

"What, aren't they?" persisted Sally.

A sly smile came to Granny Phyllis's working lips, that looked so quaint when she ate. "Sally wants to know if you two 'ave fixed up things yet?" she asked, and there was a general holding of breaths.

## *The Threshold of Adventure*

Sylvester wished Sally at the devil, but not audibly.

"Why should Miss Twitten think we desire to be fixed up?" asked Marion calmly, but the colour in her cheeks deepened at the last words.

There was a painful silence while Sylvester racked his brains for a way out.

"Oh, y' canna 'ide these things, y' know, Marion! Luv *will* out!" quoth Mr. Redfin waggishly, and then, as he felt the weight of the women's glances, he retired behind his moustache. Farmer John chuckled, and exchanged mirthful glances with his brother. Sylvester noticed, fleetingly, that young Jack's head was bent over his plate.

"Oh, I expect they will both get fixed up, as you call it, one of these days, Miss Twitten," said Mrs. Briscoe easily.

"Perhaps Marion is waiting for 'ur mother to meck it a double event!" said Farmer John gallantly, and so the awkward question dropped, leaving Sylvester fuming and disturbed, and Marion with a dangerous glitter in her grey eyes. The talk passed to the subject of weddings, and the latest phase in the henpecking of old Gaffer Greatoreux by his twenty-four-year-old bride was referred to. Sylvester and Marion preserved a complete silence. But at last, as Aunt Deborah was casting a speculative glance about the table before saying grace, he turned abruptly to Marion Briscoe and gabbled in a low whisper: "I want to see you after tea. In the garden."

"Me?" she repeated. "What is it?"

"I'll tell you."

After a moment: "Can't you tell me now?"

"No," he said, and while trying to tell her with his eyes he saw that already she had guessed.

She was silent, while Sylvester, whose heart was on fire for her promise, was embroiled in a discussion with Farmer James of his route beyond London to-morrow. When he was again free, she seemed to be waiting for him to speak. "Well?" he whispered, and thought, amazedly, that she looked cold.

*"For what we have received, O Lord make us truly*

## *The Golden Milestone*

*thankful*," whispered Aunt Deborah, and the company whispered its "Amens."

"All right," she said.

She seemed ungracious and unwilling, he thought with alarm.

The menfolk went to examine Jack's poultry after tea, and to cast weighty glances at the ungathered hay, while the women sat about the fire in the kitchen and talked inexhaustibly, as is their wont.

Sylvester slipped away from the men, his going noticed only by Young Jack, who seemed troubled. And Marion came out to the garden during Sally Twitten's preliminary outline of her ailments; all the women noticed her going, of course.

"*Now* what is it?" she said, with assumed lightness, as he drew her into the shelter of the privet hedge that hid them from the windows of the kitchen.

He stared at her with a happy smile. She would be a pleasant wife to have at any man's table; he would be envied. "You know why I wanted to see you!" he said, smiling with a foretaste of success.

"I don't," she said insincerely, her fair face darkening.

"Well, before I go away I want to have your promise to wait for me, Marion," he said, and took her hand against her will. "You know that I love you, Marion, and I expect you've thought I've been rather cool in not coming to see you before, but—but I've been so busy, for one thing . . . Marion, you know that I've been loving you for a long time, don't you, and that every happiness and pleasure in life for me depends on whether you love me or not?"

She turned from him and his glib tongue, freeing her hand with a pained, uneasy expression in her grey eyes. "I don't know——" she began, almost sullenly.

He took her by the shoulders, and she glanced up in alarm. "No, they'll see you," she said.

"What does that matter?" he said, fiercely forcing

## *The Threshold of Adventure*

her to turn to him, his father burning in him. "You know that I love you, Marion, and I can take only one answer! Kiss me!" Her face grew whitely apprehensive, and seeing it, he loosed her, his eyes staring unbelief. "Marion? . . . You're not frightened? Of *me*?"

"No," she said, but, startled by his violence, she trembled distressfully. "But you mustn't touch me like that again! Not again! And I can't stay out here any longer, Sylvester." She sought for a reason. "They'll notice it—in there."

"Oh, never mind what they notice!" he said roughly. "I want to know your answer, Marion! You *do* love me, don't you, Marion?"

She shook her head. "No. Not at all. Not like that," she said. "And you mustn't talk about it again."

"But——!"

"No, it's no use, Sylvie," she said unevenly. He thought she was going to cry. "You mustn't say it again. I don't care for you at all—like that. Let's be friends."

"Friends?" he said angrily, shocked by her refusal. Then he shrugged his shoulders, and turned a tragic look upon her. "There's someone else, of course!" he said.

"There isn't!"

"There is!"

Her face grew set and white. "If we are to be friends at all, Sylvester, you'll believe me when I tell you that there *isn't*!" she said. "I don't care for anybody. Not like that."

"But you like me, don't you?" There was a pained, puzzled expression in his glance.

"I like you. Yes. But it's a very different thing from—from the other thing."

They stood for a moment in the afternoon sunlight without saying a word, he so dark and richly coloured, she so fair and maidenly. They were silent and miserable.

"You know that this will be my last chance of seeing you?" he said.

## The Golden Milestone

"Yes," she replied tremulously.

"Then there's no chance for me at all?"

She shook her head, not daring to speak.

"Would it make any difference if I stayed here, and didn't go?" he asked.

There was a pained look in her eyes as she turned to him. "It wouldn't make any difference at all, Sylvie," she said. "If it would, I'd tell you." She turned to go. "Are you coming in?"

"No," he said savagely. "It's good-bye, then?"

She turned back to his side. "No, don't say that, Sylvester!" she pleaded. "Let's be good friends, as we've always been. Can't we?"

"No!" he said. "It's somebody else, of course, only you won't tell me! It's Jack!"

She turned and left him, not angrily, but as if there was nothing more to be said. He watched her go slowly up the drive, her fair, golden hair a glory in the westering sun, and felt sick with disappointment. He had thrown out a wild guess when he suggested Jack's name, a guess founded upon little nameless suspicions that his pride had hitherto treated with contempt. He turned about abruptly, hardly yet realizing that he was refused. His previous conquests had been easy. But now—when, as he thought, he really loved——

She must be mad to reject him, to reject him for Young Jack, if it *was* Young Jack. She must be mad.

That was the thought that was uppermost. To think that he went about proposing every day! Or perhaps she had heard about his previous affair with Lena Durden, his last love. And she was jealous?

Or Young Jack?

Girls had queer fancies.

No, she was jealous.

That was it!

Oh, she must be mad! To refuse *him*, Sylvester Dawe, who had been loved by a score of village girls, all of whom, although engaged and married elsewhere, still enshrined him in their hearts as their true lover, he thought.

## *The Threshold of Adventure*

Slowly he walked back to the poultry pens, his mind in a whirl. But he decided that he did not desire company, so he turned off up the Home Field and climbed, in full view of the men, up into Bluebell Wood. There, amid the rich bracken and undergrowth, that lay in long lines of sunlight and shadow from the setting sun, he cast himself down like a sullen child, and his face was dark as he went, step by step, over the interview.

Oh, what did it matter, he thought at last, rising and supporting himself upon one big hand. There were other girls in the world. But it wounded him, this refusal. Mad she might be; it was still humiliating to be refused by a strip of a girl like that. And he loved her, he thought. And to-morrow all would be over. Already all was over between them. To-morrow. . . .

And suddenly he thrilled at the proximity of to-morrow and his departure. In fourteen hours he would be on the way. Southwards. To adventure! . . .

He rose slowly, a little tune half-whistled, half-breathed through his lips. Life was a glorious thing, after all. He thought of Marion, and frowned.

Oh, she was a fool! Where else among these village louts would she find a love, or a lover, such as he had offered her? Young Jack? . . . Oh, he was clean, and good-looking in a certain way, and a decent sort. But beside himself (Sylvester) he had no colour. . . . Perhaps when he returned from France? . . . He sighed. There was something final in her refusal of him. Perhaps when he came back, rich and famous . . . in a motor-car . . . and built a big house in the village . . . and had crowds of fashionable friends . . . perhaps she would think differently. But for the present, why, let her go! He, Sylvester Dawe, was greater than her estimate of him. She would see, some day:

But it smarted, this refusal.

He descended, finally, just as the men-folk were called in to supper at eight-thirty. And as he went down the hill he was thinking of France, and of the morrow. And again the little tune was upon his lips.

Jack looked at him curiously, he thought, and looked

## *The Golden Milestone*

yet again. Was there something in that guess, after all? Or was Jack expecting the fifty pounds he had promised? He would pay the money after supper. It was a nuisance, but granny had asked him, and he could not well refuse. If there had been a chance of refusing he would have taken it. Twelve hours!

Supper was an uneventful meal. The company knew that something had happened, but nothing was said. Even Miss Twitten was muzzled. And at nine o'clock good-byes were said, much jocular advice was given, and the guests departed.

"What's the matter, Marion?" asked Mrs. Briscoe, as she walked down the drive beside her daughter.

Marion shrugged. "Oh, nothing," she said uncomfortably. And then: "Sylvester—he asked me to marry him."

They went in silence out into the dark road. Beyond the ridge the village lay in gloom. In one of the labourers' cottages a red lamp shone out upon the tree-trunks, and bats were wheeling about the sky.

"And you refused him, dear?"

"Yes. Of course!"

Mrs. Briscoe took her arm, and squeezed it affectionately beneath her own. Marion knew that explanations were unnecessary, for Sylvester was not in Mrs. Briscoe's good books; he was "the most selfish young man in Staffordshire," she said.

"Is there anyone else, dear?"

Marion shook her head secretly. And Mrs. Briscoe thought of Young Jack, and smiled her satisfaction into the darkness.

### 4

In the morning he departed on the carrier's cart for the station at Ruggenham.

It was a dark, misty morning, and the world was moist with dew. Granny Mary and Aunt Deborah and Young Jack came out to the carrier's cart; Farmer John always slept late, and in the hurry of making preparation

## *The Threshold of Adventure*

Aunt Deborah had forgotten to waken Belle. Sylvester would not hear of her being wakened. It would take too much time, for one thing.

Aunt Deborah and Young Jack lifted up his great portmanteau to the seat at the rear, while Granny Mary wrung her hands and smiled in forced good spirits. Aunt Deborah flashed a glance to her son: "Has he given you the money?" But Young Jack would not see it.

Then he bent down and kissed them. "Shan't be long before I'm back, y'know!" he said.

"No, course not," said granny, smiling tremulously. "You'll be back afore we begin to miss y'."

"Sylvie, I thought you was goin' to give Jack a bit o' that money?" said Aunt Deborah determinedly.

He raised a forgetful head. "Course!" he said. "I was forgettin'! But it's locked up in my portmanteau——"

"Send it on, then, Sylvie," said Young Jack, feeling his position acutely. "Don't bother with it now."

His mother scowled at him.

Belle came running wildly down the drive, and Sylvester saw tears in her eyes. "Oh, Sylvie, I thought you'd gone!" she said, and paused a moment to recover her composure. "You should have wakened me!" She jumped up on the wheel, and kissed him affectionately, and he felt her tears on his cheek. "Good-bye, and be sure to write, Sylvie! And have a good time and enjoy y'self!"

"Righto! I shan't be long before I'm back!" he said, pleasure lighting up his eye. They stared upon him like mourners—at his grey mackintosh over his best black suit, at his new grey velour, and his too-new kid gloves and new walking-stick and striped silk muffler, at his sallow face and tiny moustache and red lips and dark eyebrows above his dancing eyes. He was happy, they saw with a sigh. "Good morning!"

They called good morning, pretending that it was not good-bye, and the carrier touched his horse with the whip.

Down the hill they went, the fresh, moist air on his



## *The Golden Milestone*

face, and then rattled up the ridge. At the top he turned and waved to them. Belle waved frantically; Granny Mary raised a handkerchief; Aunt Deborah and Jack waved hands. The last glimpse showed Aunt Deborah and Young Jack putting their arms about Granny Mary, while Belle still stared blankly after the cart. And then the cart was over the ridge and the watchers disappeared behind it, and the ground seemed to rise up between, like a page that is turned irrevocably.

He gulped, and sat very still, as they rattled through the awakening village, and his glance searched the Briscoe farm along Shooker's Lane for a parting sign of Marion, but the mist was too dense. She was probably weeping, he thought, and regretting her refusal of yesterday. Should he call at the house? . . . Something within him told him that to call would be worse than useless. The cart turned into the Ruggenham road, leaving the Girls' College and the houses behind, and the country received it.

The carrier's questions roused him from his gloomy lethargy, forcing him to talk of Paris and the south, and gradually the gloom passed, and he shook himself into the realization that he was en route!

To-morrow he would be in Paris!

And the little song of content came again to his lips, and he smiled as the spire of Ruggenham church rose up in the lightening sky.

It was The Day!

## CHAPTER V

### THE SACRED HILL

#### I

RUFFLED and creased with travel, but still—in spite of the cold crossing, the nuisance of the Customs examination, and the discomfort of the French third-class carriage—retaining enough spirits to feel excitement, he emerged from the gloom of the Gare St. Lazare into the morning sunlight of the little square. He stood for a moment gazing at the endless stream of people on the pavements and the packed lines of taxis that threaded wild, intricate paths through the horse-traffic. And, in this French city, with his creased mackintosh and too-new gloves and velour and great cumbersome portmanteau, he looked like a peasant who has intruded into the gay, bustling heart of the West End, a very provincial come to town.

Brushing by a taxi-driver who would have dispossessed him, he shouldered his portmanteau and walked timidly down to the busy street that crossed the end of the square. He was breathless, and walked guiltily, like an intruder, his dark gipsy face burning with excitement. The land of adventure! Romance awaiting every step! . . . He had arrived!

He stood for a moment at the corner. Nobody stared at him, as they had stared at New Street and Euston and Victoria. They did not recognize the great painter who was coming to show them what real painting was! . . . But what queer, square-cut and pointed beards on young faces! This man approaching, apparently sixty or seventy, with his great black beard; he passes, and walks

## The Golden Milestone

trimly away, his twenty-year old legs betraying him. What a queer world!

He chuckled, and then grew sheepish as three midinettes stared their surprise.

Lord, but it was warm! And only twenty to seven! And he was getting tired of carrying his portmanteau. Espying a café upon the opposite corner—a dream come true!—he braced up his courage, strode across the street in carefully affected defiance of taxis, and after taking off his overcoat he plumped down into one of the little coloured cane seats beside a round, marble-topped, brass-rimmed café table. He arranged his portmanteau and mackintosh upon another chair, and sighed in content.

"*M'sieu?*"

A gaunt, aproned waiter stood beside him.

But excitement had deprived Sylvester of his carefully conned French. He gasped, fumbled with his grey tie, and then stared, almost sternly, upon the waiter.

"Drink," he said in English. "*Buvez.*"

"*Comment?*"

"Pardon?"

The waiter stared. "English?" he inquired.

"Yes. You might know. . . . What have you got to drink?"

"*Comment?*"

They stared helplessly at each other. Then the waiter, who, like all French waiters, could be as dense or as intelligent as the mood suggested, said: "*Bière?*"

"Beer? . . . Yes. *Oui.* Thanks."

Sylvester perspired; it was not so difficult as this during the war, he thought.

"*Brun?*"

"*Brun?*"

"*Oui. Bière brun?*"

"*Ah oui!*" said Sylvester, raising his head upon the first word as if now he understood completely. "*Bière brun, s'il vous plaît.*"

The waiter returned with a large wine-glass full of pale, sweetish ale.

## *The Sacred Hill*

"I have no French money," said Sylvester in his best Grammar School French.

"*Comment?*"

They stared like fighting-cocks.

"I-have-no-French-money!" he repeated sternly, syllabically, in French.

"Ah," said the waiter in French. "You have no French money. Give me English money."

And then Sylvester Dawe, who had begun to fancy himself in the rôle of sophisticated cosmopolitan, showed a handful of English coins, offering them to the waiter, who unblushingly picked a half-crown and, after a startled glance at the queer-looking Englishman, re-entered the café to inform his sallow, aproned confrères of the doings of the strange fish the café had caught.

The fish groaned over that half-crown. If a glass of sweetish pale ale, miscalled brown beer, cost two-and-six, his sojourn in Paris would be short. Furtively he felt in his breast-pocket, and brought forth an innocent pencil, while his glance travelled about in affected unconcern. His money (that he had taken from his portmanteau in the train) was safe. . . . He remembered Jack's fifty pounds. Oh, there was plenty of time to send that. He wanted to forget England, for was he not in Paris, the city of his dreams? And Montmartre and the Sacred Hill, were they not beneath his hand? He filled and lit his cherry-wood pipe, and drank his brown beer, and stared out happily, at his ease, upon the strange scene.

Bearded young men, strangely hatted and capped, waisted extraordinarily, stepped quickly along the pavements; some carried shining black brief-cases, some carefully rolled umbrellas, and all looked spruce and Sundayish to his country eye. They were clothed in dark suits, with few colours, yet they looked effeminate. And there were older men with upturned moustaches and wearing alpaca coats; there were a few straw hats; there were midinettes, coquettish yet reserved, well-draped, sylph-like, ugly-featured, and powdered, in his opinion, to a ridiculous extent, so that he had doubts about their

## *The Golden Milestone*

moral virtues; and there were old women, mostly slatternly, a few respectable and provincial. There were one or two strangely clipped dogs; a number of Alsatian wolfhounds; no cats; no birds. The sun, that was becoming warmer every minute, beat down upon the over-ornate façades of the tall houses, and upon the red and green and yellow striped blinds that overhung their many small iron balconies; upon the quick, restless crowd; upon the barrows upon one side of the square, where—oh wonder of wonders!—grapes were piled high, thousands of them, small yellow grapes with transparent green hearts, the bloom still untarnished upon their faces, and beside them were carrots and shapely aubergines like purple gourds, and melons wanly burnished, and stirring, twitching, dripping entanglements of giant lobsters and bubble-blowing crabs. Sunlight upon all; colours in crude patches; strange scents in the air; suggestions of gaiety and unconventional delights; whispered incitements to adventure. *Foreign! . . .*

He smiled and nodded joyously upon all. He had smiled many times since he left Abbott's Crawford; he felt few regrets. And about this time, at Crowmarsh, they would be taking the cows to the milking sheds, and Young Jack—(he would remember to send that money)—would be inspecting his fowl before going up to the High Field to help gather the hay-gleanings. And Aunt Deborah and Granny Mary and Belle and Gladys May would be stirring about the house, scrubbing floors and scouring dishes, and talking village gossip. He seemed to see the little wet hamlet overhung by clouds, and he thrilled with joy at his escape. Here was the sun, and here were foreign sights and sounds, and everything was clean and fresh, and one had nothing to do but enjoy oneself (and, of course, paint; he must not forget that), and every day and every acquaintance might bring adventure. And then he started forward in an attitude of intense, incredulous delight; he thrilled like a ten-year-old picture "fan" who should see a rankly real cowboy come lurching down the village street. For here, strolling unconcernedly along the pavement, came a tall

## *The Sacred Hill*

fellow wearing a broad-brimmed hat, a velvet coat, a flapping black silk tie, uncreased trousers and broken boots; he carried a portfolio of pictures under one arm, and, further to ingratiate himself, had an appearance of careless poverty. . . . Marcel! Colline! Rodolphe! Schaunard! . . . The figures in his Murger suddenly walked in the sun!

It was true!

The stranger caught the stare of the dark, ill-dressed foreigner, hesitated, and then stopped and laid his portfolio upon the café table.

"M'sieu would like to see my poor pictures?" he asked in French, opening the portfolio.

"*Comment?*" said Sylvester through his nose, but fell to studying the paintings without more words; thank God painting speaks the same tongue, he thought. It was good, alarmingly good, this little water-colour of a sunlit, semi-nude girl dappled with leaf-shadows. The man had more than taste. Even the amateur artist realized that here was something beyond his present powers.

"Fifteen francs," the man said. "It is of Louise, the famous Montparnasse model. I have others, too, M'sieu. . . ."

But Sylvester did not wish to buy; what confident young artist would ever buy a fellow-aspirant's pictures? He shook his head. "It is good, very good," he said in his slow French. "But too dear."

"Ten francs," the man said, after proffering others in vain.

"Ten francs for this?" asked Sylvester at last, pointing to a larger painting, a brightly coloured study of an old street and market women with their piled barrows. It captured one of Sylvester's dreams, and would serve as a copy, too.

To Sylvester's surprise the painter agreed. And then he could not pay in French money.

"English?" asked the other, when he had made his difficulty understood.

"Yes."

## *The Golden Milestone*

"So'm I," said the other casually. "Give it me in shillings."

Sylvester gasped. "You're English?" he managed to say. "What part?"

"Derbyshire. Near Matlock."

"Glad to meet you. How much?"

"Ten shillings."

The franc was worth fourpence-ha'penny.

"Ten fours and ten ha'pennies. Here's four bob. Call it square," said Sylvester, with narrowed lids.

"*Merci*. Want any more?"

"No, thanks. Is there much of a market for this sort of thing?"

The other shrugged, screwing up his lips in disillusion. "Hardly a market at all. If I can manage to make one square meal a day I'm lucky. Why? Do you paint?"

"Yes, I'm here to paint."

"Well, you take my advice, and clear out while you've got the chance. You might not be able to find the fare back home if you stay. Like me. Unless, of course, you've got money?"

Sylvester checked himself from nodding happily. The Bohemian from Derbyshire considered him and his handful of English money, and a sly, familiar look crept into his face. Sylvester's attention was arrested by it. The painter bent down and whispered hotly in his ear.

For a moment Sylvester stared. Then: "No; d——n you!" he said, recoiling.

The other opened surprised eyes, smiled and shrugged cynically, and sauntered off. A moment, and he was lost to view in the restless crowd.

Sylvester Dawe sat motionless. Romance had fled from him. Was *that* true, then, *that* part of it? He had heard tales in the war, but always they had seemed incredible. His aunt's phrase pulsed through his mind: "Women and wine! Women and wine!" Were women like that?

He grimaced in displeasure, moved his tongue about his mouth, and swallowed the draught. Then he grinned

## *The Sacred Hill*

himself back into common sense. That was merely part of it, of course, part of the glamorous foreignness of the wonderful city. Of course!

What a country bumpkin he was!

A real nonconformist!

"Where is Montmartre?" he inquired of the waiter.

The reply was unintelligible, but the gesture was sufficient. He collected his overcoat and portmanteau, and strode off up the street, the waiter's amused glance in the small of his back.

But he felt a little less jaunty, a little less happy, for in spite of his Crawford reputation he had still a countryman's clean code of virtues, that had never yet been broken.

### 2

He asked his direction again in the great square, the Place Clichy, and turned off eastwards along the Boulevard Rochechouart, that street of tinsel enchantment lying like a southern line of outposts below the Sacred Hill, that rose immediately behind it. Here, in the curious names and appearances of the cafés along the route, there was much to attract his attention, but he was too excited by the proximity of the hill, about which he had dreamed and read so much, to stop and stare; he would discover the quaintest street in the world, that should be called the Street of Disillusion, later in the day.

Place Pigalle. A tiny square containing a garden and a fountain, lying like a green but arid oasis in the baking desert of the boulevard.

Upon light feet he took the first narrow street leading steeply up the hill, the Rue des Martyrs, and suddenly the white, foreign grandeur of the church of Sacré Cœur showed like a settling cloud in the blue morning sky above him. Rue Antoinette. Impatience gripped him and flung him forward and ever upwards between rows of mean houses. The Marché St. Pierre. One further effort, endless steps beneath his feet, houses



## *The Golden Milestone*

falling below and behind him, and he stood gasping before the church on the Sacred Hill.

It intrigued his interest, this ornate mixture of styles, and having a mind that was not pestered by super-orderliness, he wisely saw nothing incongruous in the mixture. But soon he faced round, and greeted Paris from the heights.

There it lay, an ocean of diverse housetops, indistinct in the sun's quivering haze. To the south the twin towers of Notre Dame stood up in greeting, and he thought happily of Victor Hugo; there were other towers, and spires, and overgrown stores upon which stood out a word something like "NOUVEAUTE" in great white letters. And hills lay beyond, hills all round, indistinct, magical, alluring. To the east chimneys smoked upon a far, dusky horizon—a Black Country horizon—where once proud kings were buried. The houses directly below his eye were tall, dilapidated, distinct in their near ugliness, and their walls shone with yellows and reds and umbers. Smoky plants stood forlornly upon balconies; washing hung upon fragile ropes; a red counterpane was flung carelessly over one balcony rail; a lost cat explored a lost enclosure that might have been a yard or merely an architect's mistake; and everywhere walls crumbled, discoloured scars upon the brickwork showing where human demolition had helped natural decay. The world hummed softly with life. He heard the haggling of market women below in the boulevard, the swift passage of a taxi, the monotonous whine of a legless beggar, and the subdued murmuring of a million voices. The sea of houses stretched out in apparent sleep, and behind him the garish white church slept in the sun.

Paris !

He had seated himself upon the untidy edge of broken ground before the church, had taken out his pipe and inspired comfortably, intending to take in the miraculous view at his countryman's leisure, but when applying a match to his pipe he suddenly rose, collected his coat and bag, and strode off, under an overmastering impulse,

## The Sacred Hill

to explore the hill. Little streets, cobbled in places. Little, untidy shops. A few staring, slatternly old women. A maze of tiny, twisting roads, with here and there a glimpse of a quiet, picturesque courtyard. One had to be careful to keep one's bearings, for the top of the hill was so small that every street seemed to lead downwards. And then he stepped by chance into the Place du Tertre, that little lost square with its tinted, forward-leaning houses, its square of trees enclosing a space on which stood many café tables piled high with brightly-coloured café chairs. There was a dirty, picturesque old painting shop on the north side, and hung about its doors were little, unframed oil-paintings and a few delightful *eaux-forts*. He examined them, and stared in admiration. The marked prices startled him by their insignificance. Art, then, abounded. But at such ridiculous prices. Had that horrible painter from Derbyshire been right? Sylvester had ascribed his apparent disillusion to professional caution, but here were paintings, good paintings, costing as much as a quarter-pound of tobacco! It was disturbing to one who hoped to preserve his legacy by the exercise of his brush. But nothing should daunt him, he decided courageously. There must be a market for his wares. He turned and surveyed the tiny square with delight. This place, he felt obscurely, was the heart of Montmartre, the centre and soul of its Bohemian life. Here Schaunard must have roystered with Marcel and Colline and Rodolphe, and with Louise and Musette and Mimi, those fragile daughters of love. What a place!

He had attracted the attention of a stout young person in black silk, with pink bows in her hair; she looked out and smiled upon him from a bedroom window, but with difficulty, for her mouth was encumbered with hairpins. And he smiled back happily, until memory of the English painter returned. Perhaps this girl? And perhaps Mimi and Musette and Louise were of that class? Of course they were. Yet, he had imagined them differently. It was disheartening. An old woman passed across the bare square; upon her feet slopped a pair of ragged red slippers, she wore no stockings, and her enormously thick

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ankles were coffee-stained with dirt. He turned away in disgust, and looked upon the pictures. They, at least, would not disillusion him.

The shop-keeper appeared, a stout, untidy, red-faced woman.

"M'sieu desires?"

The French shop-keeper has never had subtlety; he waits, like a spider, in his shop, and by his quick pounces upon chance hesitators drives away many potential customers. But Sylvester desired rooms and a wash; the hot sun, excitement, and the weight of his coat and portmanteau had brought fatigue.

"No pictures, thank you. I am a painter." He looked for a welcome, and was disappointed. "I desire a furnished room here."

The shop-keeper shrugged, and turned away. "Try the third door there," she said casually.

The third door there stood between two small windows, into which he glanced, and was shocked to find himself staring upon paintings worthy of the Louvre. Their magnificent beauty humiliated him. He sighed, and looked through the open doorway into a kind of mixed café and picture-gallery.

A thin, gaunt woman of thirty, a Swiss by her out-reaching walk, came forward from a table at which she had been arranging water-colours. She looked sly and avaricious, and not too clean, he thought; and somehow she reminded him of Sally Twitten.

"M'sieu?"

"Madame, have you a furnished room to let?" he asked. (It was one of his prepared phrases.)

"But yes, m'sieu! But one only. A bedroom, yet it is of great size, and has every comfort for a gentleman. Will m'sieu follow me, and see it for himself?" She smiled familiarly upon him. "*Allons!*"

He followed her in some distaste. She led up a flight of narrow stairs, and opened the door of a small room at the end of the landing. They smiled upon each other conventionally, and he entered at her murmured "*Passez.*" He smelt camphor and soap. The room looked by a small

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window upon the square, and upon the opposite side of the square, now upon his own level, he could see the young person with the hairpins peering into every corner of the square for him. There was a small bed, an unpolished little chest of drawers, an unstable chair upholstered in worn silk, no fireplace, a tiny cracked mirror, a jug of water tepid in the sun, a wash-bowl, a little piece of coarse brown scented soap, and a scrap of frayed red mat.

In some confusion he turned back the bed-clothes. Probably clean. Then a great hump below the lower half of the blankets excited his curiosity.

"What's this?"

"*Comment?*" She rattled off a quick French phrase that he did not understand; he afterwards found the hump was a feather-bed. He nodded as if he understood. "M'sieu is—English?"

"Yes," he said.

"Is m'sieu satisfied with the room?"

He considered for a moment; fatigue and his countryman's sense of sweet cleanliness warred within him. Fatigue won. "Yes, I will take it. I shall be here a long time. What is your price?"

"Eight francs per day, if m'sieu is here for a long time. The rent for one week in advance. M'sieu is satisfied?" She seemed to be trying to estimate him.

"Yes. I am a painter."

"M'sieu is a painter?"

"Yes. Are there many painters here?"

"On the hill? It is overrun with them, as a stable with rats. But I have the best of them all here. Ah, yes, he was a pupil of Ingres!"

"Ingres?" he gasped, when his brain grasped the pronunciation. "You have a gentleman here, a pupil of Ingres?"

"But yes! And he is sixty-five! And paints still! Ah, but that is a painter, now! He paints not as the young men do, but as his master did, and all the great ones. Ah, yes, he is a true one. Raphael is his inspiration; he has no patience with the young men and their

## *The Golden Milestone*

mad ideas. No, ah, no! Those are his pictures in the window. He takes pupils, too, if you desire instruction. Yes, and he is a poet, too!" She sniggered, as one who shows off a vulgar wonder. "But you shall see him, and his paintings. For you are neighbours now, *n'est-ce pas?*"

He was amazed both at the information and at the knowledge of the informer. Art was in the air, he gladly reflected.

"I should be glad to meet him," he said. "Thank you. I think I will wash."

Still she waited. "The advance, M'sieu. It is the custom," she said, smiling familiarly.

He took out his sheaf of money, and gave her a pound note, explaining its value in francs. She eyed it suspiciously, but after a glance at his portmanteau she left him.

He threw off his coat and stretched his long, awkward body. Sleep? Not likely! He ached to set out from this corner in the heart of Bohemia and explore the wonderful world about him. His face was hot and stiff where spray had dried, during the previous night, upon it, and he felt unclean after his four hours' torment in the French train. He would wash.

Ingres, he thought, with the stink of the brown soap in his nose. Art in the air! Abbott's Crawford! It seemed to lie on another planet, so long had been the journey. But he was *in* it now, steeped to the eyes in the atmosphere for which he had craved. He bathed himself in the thought of his surroundings, bathed luxuriously, at splendid ease.

After a towelling and a struggle between his curly black hair and his pocket comb, he breathed in relief, and suddenly realized that he was hungry. He glanced at the lock of his portmanteau, hung up his mackintosh, bestowed the painting he had bought in one of the drawers, and was ready for the venture.

He gave a toss to his shoulders, once more lit his cherry-wood pipe, and ran downstairs and out into the square without seeing his landlady. He crossed the square

## The Sacred Hill

—the hairpin person had disappeared—and turned southward to descend the Hill.

His money he kept in his breast pocket. It was safe. He must get one of those flowing black ties and a broad-brimmed hat. Yes, and more colours and brushes and canvases. But first, food—French food—French cooking. He swallowed noisily.

He looked younger than he had looked for five years. His dark, tanned face held happiness, his black eyes danced, alert for the appearance of possible friends—he, Sylvester Dawe, who had been considered by the young men of Abbott's Crawford as morose and unsocial unless there were present members of the opposite sex. One saw the reason for the lapse of poor Bessie Winterton in the happy, vagabond handsomeness of his look, that country clothes could not hide. He swung his arms in exaggerated unconcern, and his out-turned country feet clumped faster and faster as he hastened down the Hill. He stuck his hands deep into his trouser pockets, and smoked furiously.

The Rue des Martyrs swallowed him.

### 3

It was fifteen minutes after midnight, and the Rue Rochechouart hummed like a pleasure hive. Lights of every colour streamed out from the café windows and doors, and long bars of electric light outlined the fronts of the cafés; glasses clinked, and girls laughed, and men—young men for the most part—settled themselves back in café chairs to talk fruitily of the Rhine occupation and the policy of Lloy' Jorje and the latest murder and the forthcoming fête, speaking of trivialities with as much warmth and enjoyment as they spoke of foreign policies. Much strange music of many kinds filled the night air, and many lovers murmured passionate endearments in the shadows beyond the lights.

But the *Lapin Agile* prided itself upon its *ton*, upon the excellence of its music, and its wines, and upon the exclusive prices it dared to charge. A violin wailed over

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the hushed crowd seated within and without its doors, yet still one voice talked, talked without restraint or intermission in atrocious French and dialect English.

"This France . . . this Paris!" cried Sylvester Dawe to two young men who sat at his table and smiled drunkenly upon him. "It is the smile of women! It is life, heaven, art, everything! It is beautiful as the sun in the skies, or as the . . . as the smile of a sweetheart. . . . It is the salute of a friend! It is—— But drink up and fill again!" he said in English, and drank off white wine. (His day had included *vin rouge*, *curaçoa*, bock, champagne, beer, and now a bottle of white wine.) In maudlin fashion he continued, still in English: "I came here expecting to find it a myth, myths! *Myths!* But is it a miss—a myth? . . . No! Contradict *that* if you can! . . . No, it is gloriously true! It is——!"

The proprietor, who had been furtively watching, now came forward, ostensibly to take Sylvester's order, but actually to whisper a courteous request for silence while the violinist played.

"*Comment?*" said Sylvester Dawe in a voice that was heard in the innermost depths of the café. His handsome dark face was flushed and vivacious as it had never been before; his black curls fell awry; his eyes held a suggestion of heaviness. If Aunt Deborah had seen him then, her worst fears would have been realized. Some excuse for his transfigured appearance must be found in his previous abstinence from intoxicating drinks, in the unaccustomed heat of the day, and in his almost delirious excitement at the realization of his dream.

The proprietor repeated his request.

"Of course! Of course!" said the mad Englishman in his native tongue. "Drink with me, m'sieu!" He reeled to his feet. "To your good health, m'sieu! Long life to the Hill!"

Every eye was turned in his direction, eyes in which were mingled contempt and the general inquisitiveness of French eyes. The proprietor appealed to Sylvester's companions, but their plight was as bad as the Englishman's. Indeed, they rose—the short, sturdy, merry-faced

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one and the tall, sandy exquisite—and seized Sylvester's arms, and there, before the astonished eyes of the Rue Rochechouart, that has seen stranger sights than any street in the world, before the sacred doors of the *Lapin Agile*, they danced a ludicrous version of the can-can, after the model of the *Bal Tabarin*.

At this moment, as the proprietor was casting a speculative eye in the direction of his henchmen, Sylvester fortunately decided that he wished to sleep—it was long past Abbott's Crawford's hour of retiring—and after making mocking bows and valedictory speeches, the trio went staggering off towards the Rue des Martyrs. The entire clientèle of the *Lapin Agile* came to the pavement to watch their progress. The trio addressed pathetic words of greeting and farewell to the idlers at each café along the route, and outside the *Bal Montmartre* they stayed to play with a bevy of midinette dancers, who at last persuaded them to enter the dance hall.

"The mad English!" murmured someone in the ear of the proprietor of the *Lapin Agile*.

"The big cow that he is," he replied gently.

His clients had barely settled in their seats when howls of derision came from the *Bal Montmartre*, and in a moment the café was once more deserted. The Englishman's two companions either jumped or were thrown from the doorway of the dance hall, and as they staggered to their feet Sylvester Dawe was flung upon them. There were peals of laughter and a volley of excited comment as the trio collapsed. Someone whispered a warning: a gendarme approached on cat's feet. Two young men seized the arms of the trio and hurried them round into the comparative darkness and safety of the Rue des Martyrs.

"*Merçi!* . . . What will you drink?" asked Sylvester Dawe. But they laughed and returned to their café. The trio talked and talked, swaying unsteadily and clutching with convulsive fingers at each other for support. Anatole, the tall, thin exquisite, was in partnership with his uncle in some café called the *Trois Petits Porcs*, and he told Sylvester, at great length, that he would set up



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in a café himself when She was ready. Jean, the short, sturdy one, tapped his brawny chest again and again, repeating, "I am a boxer, the middle-weight champion of the *magazins*," but Sylvester could not understand.

"You? Boxer?" he asked with weighty gravity.

"Yes. I am the middle-weight champion of the *magazins*," he said. "You understand?"

"No. . . . *Magazins*?"

"Yes."

"Ah, he is in love," said Anatole vaguely, a mournful expression on his long face, where grew a tiny sandy moustache of comic appearance.

They debated a return to the *Lapin Agile*, but Sylvester was stubborn in his desire to return to his room, and they staggered off at last, labouring drunkenly at the Hill, their voices asking and answering vague questions, their hands gesturing wildly. The ascent, a distance of a hundred yards, occupied twenty minutes.

Sylvester gasped when at last they reached the Place du Tertre. A transformation scene had been enacted during his absence. All the brightly coloured chairs had been taken from the tables, lamps had been lit in the trees and candles on the tables, while a noisy multitude took supper and wine in the space between the trees, and vagabond minstrels rent the air with their shouts and indiscriminate tunes.

In this strange world Sylvester lost his bearings. They stayed to talk and drink at one table and to argue at another, and finally discovered Sylvester's domicile on the western side by the simple expedient of knocking at each door progressively. It was then half-past one.

"I swear she loves me, but how can I discover it when she is so silent, and laughs at all that I can say?" said Jean in agonized tones. "I see it in her looks, in the beautiful coils of her hair——!"

"It is bobbed!" said Anatole.

"——And would she deign to love me, to but give me hope, there is naught that I could not do for her sake! I would let Georges Carpentier know that there was a *boxer* in Paris . . . !"

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"*Ah, c'est folie!*" murmured Anatole. "Whenever he remembers he is sad!"

After an affecting farewell they parted, but Jean returned to Sylvester's side and whispered tragically, his warm southern face glowing in the lamplight: "Her name is Yvonne! She is an angel from heaven! And I adore her! Her hair is black as night! Her lips are ripe cherries! Her little hands are fair as water-lilies! . . . Can you lend me ten francs?"

Sylvester, in spite of his mental muddle, could still feel suspicion at the request. After an affected search of his pockets he brought out four one-franc notes, pressed them into the boxer's hand, and bade him a rather curt good-night, leaving the borrower muttering vaguely of ". . . the beauty that is possessed only by her, Yvonne. . . ."

He found his way up to his room without accident and without encountering his gaunt landlady. His room was dark. Lights were flung, wheeling, about its ceiling and walls. He crossed to the window and cast a benediction and a few ten-centime pieces upon the mad crowd below. They called to him, entreating him to come down. He turned away from the window in order to descend, but forgot his purpose and fell, with a sigh of content and a groan, caused by the pain of his bruised sides, upon the bed, there to dream strange and terrible dreams, while outside, beyond the open window, the Hill rioted until the moon paled and the first little wan morning wind crept into the square like the spectre of disillusion. The lamplight grew garish, candles guttered out, the humans stretched themselves and bade tired good-nights; and then, as a ghostly glimmer lit the east, touching the dome of *Sacré Cœur* with a faint, unearthly radiance, the lamps went out. The Hill slept.

Sylvester snored, his flushed, bedewed face in the shadow.

## *The Golden Milestone*

### 4

The same moon shone, but from a darker sky, upon a whitewashed, dilapidated farmhouse standing where the road dipped down into the moist hamlet of Crowmarsh. The windows held a lurking beauty, and the little flowers of the garden nodded in the ghostly radiance and whispered to each other the story of the day's delight. Cattle moved restlessly in the fields, and sometimes a bat squeaked above the house. The wet road shone, eerily deserted, and bosky shadows fell across it in sharp-edged gloom. A fox howled faintly from Bluebell Wood, and a dog in the village answered him.

Granny Mary moved and smiled in her sleep, thinking of him. . . .

## CHAPTER VI

### LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

#### I

AT six o'clock on the following morning he rose from an uncomfortable, broken sleep and took miserable stock of his condition. His head, unaccustomed to the effects of strong drink, hummed ceaselessly, as one's ears hum after sneezing; his hip and knee held dull aches where he had fallen when thrown from the doors of the *Bal Montmartre*; his stomach's action was obtrusive and rebellious, and his thoughts turned easily to death and the grave.

He crawled out of bed, washed, and changed the black suit in which he had slept for a fresh suit of grey flannel that held a scent of Crowmarsh. He glanced through the window as he combed his hair, and saw the Hill touched by the mystic half-lights of morning and the dome of *Sacré Cœur* flushed along one edge by an unearthly radiance. But he glanced away again, for his eyes were heavy, gritty and swollen. He leaned his head against the cool wall, closed his eyes, and vowed miserably that in future he would shun strong drink. After all, there was a lot in that talk of Aunt Deborah and her crew about the effects of drink.

Suddenly he pulled out his wallet of notes and carefully counted his money. He found that he had already spent seventy francs, nearly thirty shillings. He groaned. He must set to work and retrench the loss by the sale of his first picture. But his immediate necessity was fresh air.

He reached the little café parlour, that was also a picture gallery, without interruption, unbolted and unchained the door, and inspired gratefully as the sweet

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morning air met him. In the little square that would soon radiate heat so uncomfortably all was sweet, clean, invigorating and coldly moist, and the trees scented the air like the trees of Crowmarsh. From mysterious by-streets came melancholy cries of "*Charbon! . . . Charbon!*" the tuneful sound of a dustman's horn, and the cheerful, friendly rattling of milk-carts that might have been rattling along the Ruggenham road. He thought of the village and of its cleanliness and its fresh country air, and as he descended to the Rue Rochechouart he was in the throes of an unaccountable nostalgia.

The scene of last night's madness was deserted, and in the morning light its colours looked cheap and tawdry. He glanced about him in distaste, and the appearance of a gendarme caused him to slink off westwards. A splash of brazen colours near the fountain in the Place Pigalle attracted his languid attention; five dark-featured girls in brightly coloured costumes and gaudy shawls stood chatting together. Foreigners, he thought. They glanced across at him as he stared, ceasing their chatter, and as he turned away in some confusion the inspiring truth reached him: they were Italian models waiting to be hired. Smiling with pleasure, he glanced back, and the models returned his smile, but in quiet derision of his country slouch and air of *gaucherie*.

He turned almost angrily and marched on westwards, to the Place Clichy and the Boulevard des Batignolles, where he stood for a moment overlooking the rear of the Gare St. Lazare. Had he done well to come? . . . He proceeded, sleepily considering the question, and entered the Parc Monceau, drawn thither by the abundance of trees and the sweet country wholesomeness of the place. Broken columns shone whitely amid the foliage, the trim little walks were deserted, and flowers sat in orderly rows upon the borders. He sat down before the carp pool upon a little metal chair that was still damp and cold with dew, and his country eye was drawn by the great, dull-purple carp, with their age upon their bulging backs, and the shrimp-coloured goldfish that played about their bigger brethren in sluggish self-con-

## *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*

centration. There was even a thin veil of mist over the far corner of the pond, a proper Crowmarsh mist. He sighed for a rod and line. He remembered a Crowmarsh incident of three years ago, when Johnny Waters and Alec Jackson and other youths of the village had killed a pike, using gunpowder in a bottle as their weapon. He took out his cherry-wood pipe and smoked, his eyes upon the fish, until relief came.

He must leave the wine alone, he saw. His work must claim him. He had not come here to play the fool. . . . After breakfasting he would spend the day at the Louvre. He must go often to the Louvre and obtain copies. Then, at night, he would return to the Place du Tertre, bringing with him a copious supply of painting materials. And an easel. Yes, he would need an easel. . . . Crowmarsh? Pshaw! What a fool he had been to regret it an hour ago! Another effect of strong drink, no doubt. . . . "Wine and women," Aunt Deborah had said. She had an unhappy success with her prophecies. But at least the second part of the prophecy should be rendered void. It would be time to consider the woman, *his* woman, when his fame was assured. He thought of Marion Briscoe, and sorrow possessed him during the time it took to glance over his roughened, country nails. He rose to seek breakfast, and left the quiet morning beauty of the park to wander along the Boulevard Malesherbes, scanning shop-signs eagerly, gathering determination and spiritual health at every step. *Épicerie*. . . . *Mercerie*. . . . *Biscuiterie*. . . . *Café*. . . . *Horlogerie*. . . . *Bijouterie*. . . . He would breakfast at the first restaurant. . . .

Sharp-edged shadows lay in flat masses along the eastern side of the boulevard, along which passed a few towzled market women, at each of whom the vivacious group of blue-trousered road-men glanced critically. On the western side striped blinds of many colours were already upheld against the sun. But when a countryman thinks of food such things as effects of light and shade have but a pallid appeal. He pressed on, found his restaurant, and dived within.

## The Golden Milestone

### 2

For a fortnight he had painted in strict seclusion, seeing neither of his acquaintances of the first mad night. Once or twice he had spoken to a great, gaunt old man with a beautiful white beard, the pupil of Ingres, who lived in the house, but the pupil of Ingres, after listening to Sylvester's lame French and seeing the progress of his first picture, became cool and unapproachable; age must be pardoned certain coolnesses.

Morning, noon and night he worked, ungladdened by wine or company or conversation, worked doggedly, with infinite pains, with inhuman concentration upon his post-card copy of *La Bohème*, determining that in his copy the Hill should recognize the hand of a new master. He lived like a hermit, tormented by his vain desire, feeding on scraps: a nameless pie; a melon and a stick-loaf; a cup of chocolate and a *brioche*; a loaf and a carton of delicious Gruyère; a bunch of grapes; a basket of peaches; a *vol-au-vent* ready made in a basin; rusks and a bottle of milk. He avoided even the smallest quantity of wine, for its effects, combined with the heat, made him drowsy. He flogged his spirit forward to the task, ruthlessly rowelling its sides, giving no heed to aught else, immersed, and consenting, in his continued travail. Art is *La Belle Dame sans Merci* for some men, and Sylvester Dawe was among their number. Yet the tragi-comedy of his painting career was actuated by vanity more than a desire to multiply beauty. He had neither written nor received letters, and Jack's fifty pounds remained in his wallet. There was plenty of time for that; one must taste the joy of keeping the legacy almost intact for a little while.

And then, one great night, when all the world seemed to stand in the breathless silence of expectancy, he finished his picture, and wandered about the little bedroom, viewing his copy of the impudent gipsy girl from every angle. It was good, he thought; better, at least, than he had done before. . . .

The paint was scarcely dry when he hurried down in

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the hot afternoon sunlight to the Rue de Rivoli, the gipsy girl beneath his arm. He overlooked the fashionable crowd, and found the most prosperous-looking shop for his need. He entered.

"M'sieu?"

"I have finished a copy of *La Bohème*, m'sieu," he said slowly in his curious French. "I desire to sell it," and he busied excited fingers with the wrappings about his painting.

"Ah, it is not necessary, m'sieu!" the dapper little Frenchman said in alarm. "We do not buy so!"

"And why not?"

The shopkeeper shrugged. "We have certain channels, m'sieu. . . . So!"

"But see it, m'sieu!" said Sylvester, bending again to his parcel. Rising quickly, and producing the gipsy girl, in spite of the other's protest, he glanced about the shop for a good light in which to place it, blundered clumsily into two lady tourists (one of whom swore, in English, most uncompromisingly), found the place he sought, and, turning proudly, was chagrined to find that the little shopkeeper was attending exclusively to the tourists.

He waited, fuming, beside his picture, and thought scornfully of French courtesies.

In ten minutes he was less scornful, and at the end of a quarter of an hour he acknowledged the shopkeeper's: "And *now*, m'sieu!" with a humble inclination of the head. The shopkeeper placed his spectacles on his nose, screwed up his eyelids, and abruptly dropped the spectacles down upon their cord.

"What price do you ask?" he said, smiling indulgently, for he had just booked a large order for reproductions.

Sylvester inbreathed excitedly. "Four hundred francs," he said, striving to give the words a casual sound.

"*Comment?*"

The shopkeeper's expression alarmed him. "Four hundred francs, m'sieu," he repeated.



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The other laughed, shrugging extravagantly. "*C'est folie!*" he replied.

"M'sieu!"

"It is impossible, m'sieu," the shopkeeper replied, smiling reasonably.

"*Eh bien*, what will you offer for it, then?" asked Sylvester.

Again the other shrugged. "We do not buy so," he said again.

Sylvester glared. "Then in God's name why don't you say so?" he cried unreasonably.

The other stared, not understanding the Englishman's phrasing. "*Comment?*" he said feebly.

Sylvester fumed foolishly in his face, and then stalked out of the shop, hearing an ironical "*Bon jour, m'sieu!*" but replying nothing.

He showed his affronted gipsy girl to the keepers of two other shops in the great street, but with no better success. At the third shop he lowered his price to three hundred francs. They laughed at him.

He blundered on down the Rue de Rivoli, looking, in his anger and his country-cut clothes, like a denizen from another world, and turned off into a small street running up towards Les Halles. He seated himself upon a bench, stretching out his great feet before him, and scowled upon the fashionable crowd that streamed along the great street he had left; his shirt-front and collar and tie, that would never lie flat, looked crumpled and unlovely. There went by a motley crowd: midinettes, mannequins, rich women of all nations, a bright blue uniform, a tall, willowy figure in flowing robes and white burnous and brilliant sash, street sellers of maps and busts and novelties, pleasure parties of French and Belgian and Dutch farmers and their wives, American school-marms and their English equivalent, beggars of all nations and possessed of every horror—so went the kaleidoscopic crowd, laughing, chatting, whining and shouting, like a print by a French Hogarth. He turned away from them, from their pleasure and their misery, but chiefly from their foreign strangeness, which already had become an

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eyesore to him. There was something queer about these French folk that the language alone would not explain. In some way they were remote, unfriendly. But, after all, that might only be a result of their different tongue. What a horrible business it was, this language! It was not like good, cheerful, intimate English; here you put down a coloured word-counter, and the other fellow deposited beside it a corresponding one. There was no intimacy about it. Conversation was more pallid than a letter. Really, you wanted somebody to talk to. . . . Young Jack or Marion Briscoe, or even Johnny Waters. . . . Marion Briscoe in Paris! A honeymoon trip! . . . But she had refused him. Young Jack? Or was she piqued? Or did she wish to abstain from interfering with his career? His career? . . . He snorted, and, impatient of this inaction, rose and trudged on, his feet swollen and hot, his throat craving for wine, his brow and hands moist with perspiration.

Reaching a small picture-shop he entered and again showed his wares, this time to a young lady's man with a corpse-like face and a black beard and moustache. He looked like a waxwork figure, but spoilt the illusion by picking his teeth with a pearl tooth-pick.

"What price, m'sieu?" he demanded languidly.

"Two hundred francs."

A beautiful smile of Byronic resignation appeared within the intricacies of the beard and moustache. "Ah, no!" the lips murmured.

Sylvester grunted. "Then what *will* you offer for it?" he asked desperately.

The lady's man studied it contemptuously. "Ten francs, perhaps," he said, tapping his lip with his tooth-pick.

Sylvester stared, his gipsy blood flaming in his face, his big hands trembling. Then he settled himself squarely upon his feet, and said in a distinct, pleasant voice: "M'sieu, you are a dirty, miserable eater of frogs!"

"M'sieu!" The waxwork figure leaped into amazed life, dropping its tooth-pick.

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"Dirty, miserable eater of frogs, m'sieu ! *Au revoir*, m'sieu !" said Sylvester Dawe, and left the shop grinning, but mirthlessly, while the lady's man stared in horrified abandon.

Sylvester entered two more picture-shops, and then dejection sat upon his brow. In the early dusk—he had eaten nothing that day—he took a bock, standing beside the café table, and bracing himself for a further effort. His inherent country stubbornness upheld him.

And at five o'clock, in a little dirty street on the *rive gauche*, he sold his gipsy girl to a Jew for fifteen francs fifty.

### 3

On the evening of the same day he sat in a café chair on the Boulevard Magenta—he avoided the Rue Rochecouart and the *Lapin Agile*—and drank his bock and smoked his cheap cigar in something like content. For, on leaving the Jew, by a revulsion of feeling and the desire for food, he had thrown care to the winds, remembered the wallet of notes he carried, and hied him to the nearest eating-house. This proved to be the restaurant *Laperouse*, where Stevenson was wont to dine, and the discovery restored some of his spirits. He dined *chez Laperouse*, careless of the expense, in quiet, reticent style, and even plucked up spirits, after a second glass of Beaune, to demand the proprietor and inquire if he still remembered Stevenson. But the proprietor knew nothing of R. L. S. He finished his expensive meal, and drank so much Beaune that he had to be assisted to his taxi. He was not sure what happened after this. He knew that it was just as the taxi passed across the Rue de Rivoli that he glimpsed the outline of the Louvre in the distance, and the idea suddenly came to him that these men, these famous painters, had made their names with original works, that his failure was due to the fact that his gipsy girl was a copy. And, of course, the place was swamped with copies. Had he not seen them in every shop? He might have known ! . . . No, it was original work that

## *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*

commanded the big prices, that brought fame, that would raise him to the seats of the mighty. And he had felt ease again. He had returned to the Place du Tertre, had washed and changed, and now bit meditatively upon his cigar with hope in his heart, his mind striving hazily to refute the idea that he craved for English companionship.

Bearded young men, and girls with powder-cloaked faces, drank and chattered and made love at the café tables about him, while older people sat beyond the flood of lights and read their *L'Intransigeant* as the day died. A few girls passed and repassed him, staring heavily but fruitlessly upon him. The whole boulevard was afire with lights of many colours, and vibrant with the music of many instruments, the chatter of tongues, and the tearing passage of taxis. And in the lulls that followed the noise one heard the wailing of a violin and a tenor voice singing with feigned emotion some sentimental song called "Salome," the falling cadences of which were repeated again and again and again, without intermission.

Then Sylvester sighted familiar figures, the short, sturdy, rotund Jean and the slender fop Anatole, his companions in frolic, whom he had not seen since the mad night of his arrival. At the first glimpse his heart leaped, for he thought they were alone, but as they disengaged themselves from the crowd he saw that they were accompanied by a tall, fair young man with a beard, and by three midinettes, two of whom were short and plump, the third a dark, slender, beautiful girl whose face smiled out happiness upon the boulevard. The party stayed to gesticulate, advanced chatting, one of the plump midinettes laughed out and stayed to say something to the strange young man with the beard, and finally the party drew level with his table.

He half rose. "Jean!" he called. "Anatole!" . . .

The party turned, and at once Jean and Anatole exclaimed and came to his side, the rest following.

"It is a good friend of ours," said Jean, explaining to his friends. "M'sieu Sylvester." And Sylvester was introduced to one of the plump, merry midinettes, Mad'moiselle Berthe Girard, to the dark, slender sister,

## The Golden Milestone

Mad'moiselle Yvonne, to the third girl, a plump, rather loudly dressed midinette, Mad'moiselle Marthe Antoine (who eyed Sylvester, vulgarly searching his appearance), and the tall, bearded young man, M'sieu Edouard Theobald, a Swiss.

"M'sieu is English?" asked Yvonne Girard, looking curiously at his gipsy face.

"But, yes!" cried her plump sister Berthe before he could reply. "One can tell the hat, à l'Américain. . . . But we waste time, Anatole."

"We go to the cinema," explained Jean. "Will you not come with us?"

But Sylvester, although desiring ardently their company, saw that the party was complete, and guessed—quite wrongly—that the couples were engaged. He noticed that the long, lean Anatole, who reminded him so curiously of Johnny Waters, was whispering endearments in Berthe's ear, and that Jean attempted to take Yvonne's arm, and was repulsed. (This must be the Yvonne, Jean's angel from heaven. She was a beautiful girl, he decided.) "No, I won't come to-night," he said. "But won't you drink with me?"

Jean and Anatole laughed out. "Not to-night, m'sieu!" said Jean, while Anatole recounted their previous frolic to the girls. "We are late. . . . Therefore—*au revoir*, m'sieu, for the moment."

"We shall meet again, M'sieu Sylvester!" said Anatole warmly.

They shook hands, using left or right hand indiscriminately, in the French fashion, and he received a conventional smile from the vulgar Marthe, a little nodding smile from plump Belle, and a shy "*Au revoir*, m'sieu," from the dark, slender Yvonne.

Jean hurried back, and Sylvester rose again.

"That is my angel!" whispered Jean in a tense whisper, while the café idlers watched curiously. "Her name is Yvonne. As I said. And she is more to me than the memory of my mother! She is more beautiful than the light of the moon! . . . Can you lend me ten francs, please?"

## *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*

Sylvester disembursed, and, with promises of quick repayment, Jean hurried off after his party, while Sylvester watched them with dog's eyes until they passed out of sight in the quick crowd.

"What is that great, clumsy, handsome animal?" asked Yvonne, when Jean reached her side. And when he had told her the meagre facts: "He looks like a provincial gipsy, if such a strange animal can be said to exist."

"I think he has read romances about Montmartre, and therefore desires to paint here," said Jean. And fingering the note in his hand: "He is rich, I think."

"Romances of Montmartre? Are there such things?"

"Don't ask me! You are interested?"

"In the Englishman? But no! . . . He has an interesting face, but what awkwardness! . . . No, if *that* is English I have no desire to see them closer. *La belle France* for me!"

"And *la belle Française* for me!" he whispered, taking her arm.

"Don't!" she muttered. "*Quick!* . . . We shall lose them!"

### 4

At nine Sylvester rose from his café chair, paid the waiter, and strolled up to the Place du Tertre.

He would have given ten pounds to have gone with the party, for in spite of his resolve to paint he was in no mood for it at the moment. And that girl's face . . . so dark . . . so beautiful . . . so mysterious. . . .

He shrugged his broad shoulders. What had he to do with girls? He must fight these inclinations towards making pleasure. His work must claim him.

He would. . . . Yes, he would paint a morning picture of the Parc Monceau. . . .

"Parc Monceau, by Sylvester Dawe, that rising young artist." . . .

Yes, he must not dawdle away his time like this.

## *The Golden Milestone*

Unconsciously he quickened his step, and turned off up the Rue des Martyrs. He looked a very determined, forceful young man as he strode on up the hill, his cigar a red beacon in the gloom, his big out-turned country feet reaching out forcefully for his corner of Montmartre, through which he might pass to the larger life of wealth and fame.

## CHAPTER VII

### BEGINNINGS

"THERE'S Belle Winterton," said Mrs. Waters, a jolly little fat widow, whose neck was as short and full as her only son Johnny's was long and scraggy. "Wonder if they've 'eard from Sylvie yet."

Johnny was staring through the window, the silk stockings he was packing hanging forgotten beside him. "Yes," he said vaguely, searching the street for a sight. "I should ask her," he suggested, with a great air of unconcern.

But as she rounded the counter his eye was upon her, and no sooner had she poised her bulk in the doorway than Johnny leaned his great awkward length across the displayed pinafores and drums of ribbon and cheap lines in the window, and searched the street for Belle. He found her, in conversation with Sally Twitten, over by the garage. His glance devoured her. Ah, she was waving good-bye to Sally. She entered the grocer's. His mother shuffled on the doorstep, and Johnny leaped back to the counter.

"I think I will," said Mrs. Waters, who loved a gossip almost as much as she loved a joke. "She'll be out in a minute."

The minute seemed an eternity to the proprietor of the shop. He packed stockings that should have been unpacked, and tied seven knots in the string with which he bound them. And his head moved like an automaton from the doorway to the window.

"Here she comes," said Mrs. Waters. And Johnny's heart stood still. "Mornin', Belle. 'Ow are they all at the farm?"



## *The Golden Milestone*

"Oh, pretty well, thanks," said Belle, acutely aware of the green and white letters painted above the window :

"JOHN WILLIAM WATERS.

"LADIES' OUTFITTER."

The paint was scarcely dry.

"Morning, Miss Winterton!" said Johnny nervously.

"Morning, Mr. Waters."

"Fine day?"

"Yes, lovely."

"'Ave you 'eard from Sylvie yet?" asked Mrs. Waters, leaning her head upon one side, in her gossiping posture.

"Not yet," said Belle. "We hope to hear from him very soon. Of course he would be busy for some time getting settled down."

"Yes. Will he be there long?"

"I can't say, I'm sure. . . . Well, I must get along home. Good day. Good day, Mr. Waters!"

"Just a minute!" cried Johnny, hastening round the counter. "You surely aren't a-goin' to carry all that lot y'self . . . not all that way?"

Belle glanced down at her small basket and blushed. Mrs. Waters turned to stare amusement at her son.

"Oh!——" began Belle.

"I meanter say, it's a warm mornin', an' even the littlest thing weighs 'eavy in time," explained Johnny, in some confusion. "Little drops of water make little deeds of kindness, don't they say?"

"But what about the shop?" asked Mrs. Waters, whose amusement had given way to a crafty smile.

"Well, you just keep y'r eye on it, will y'?" said Johnny. And then, staring across the street, he said to the world in general, in a tone of judicial acumen: "I gotter bit o' business I want to see about, too, up that road. . . . That is"—(suddenly turning to Belle)—"if you don't mind, Miss Winterton?"

"I don't mind at all," said frank Belle, but her face was suffused with colour.

## Beginnings

Johnny dived into the shop, and his mother looked and smiled upon Belle queerly. Belle smiled, but would not meet the look. In one minute Johnny appeared in his velour, having changed his tie, brushed his boots, greased his hair, and studied his profile in the back-kitchen mirror.

"Now then, if you're ready, Miss Winterton," he said, taking the small basket from her, in spite of her protests. "No, I couldn't think of it," he protested firmly, his honour outraged.

"Good morning, then, Mrs. Waters," said Belle, glancing over her shoulder.

"You look as if you're off for y'r 'oneymoon!" said Mrs. Waters maliciously.

They laughed, and went off together, but Mrs. Waters noticed that they walked far apart to dispel any honeymoon suggestions in the eyes of the village.

Johnny walked with stiff ease, his dignity heavy upon him, his heart racing incredulously.

"Lovely morning, Miss Winterton?" he said.

"Yes," said Belle, who was suddenly overcome by silent mirth, which Johnny refused to notice by walking along frigidly until they came to Lovers' Lane.

"Are you coming this way?" asked Belle.

"Oh yes!" said Johnny. "I want to see a man about a dog." He cogitated visibly. "A Pom." He stared fiercely at the blue cornflowers. "A black an' tan Pom."

"Do you like Poms?" she asked.

"Do I? . . . Oh yes. Do you?"

"Pretty well."

Johnny nodded at the hedge, as if he could see a Pom there, a Pom whose points were bad. "I think there ain't nothin' better'n a good Pom. . . . A good Pom, I meanersay. There seems somethin' *about* a Pom. . . ." He ended, vaguely.

"Yes," she murmured.

"Yes," said Johnny, and then wondered bitterly why they were talking about Poms, when there were so many other breathlessly exciting subjects to be broached.

## *The Golden Milestone*

Besides, there was something daft about that word. When you said it three or four times it sounded dam silly. Poms . . . Poms . . . POMS. . . .

He shrugged his shoulders to shake off the word, and dignity stretched his underlip to cover his two protruding rabbit teeth. His brain worked fiercely, weighing the approaches to such momentous matters as the Price of Butter (there was a pound in the basket), the Village Fête Next Week, Ladies' Outfitting (too delicate), High Life at Walsall, and the Vogue of Bobbed Hair.

"Do you like cats, Johnny—Mr. Waters?" asked Belle, not without amusement. She blushed at the slip.

"Cats?" asked Johnny vaguely. "Oh yes!" (His voice sounded "daft," he decided.) "An' by the way, I wish you wouldn't call me 'Mr. Waters.' I don't know 'ow it is, but I don't like to be called 'Mr. Waters,' not no'ow. . . . I meanter say, not between friends. . . . Because we've known one another a long time, if you come to think of it."

"Yes," said Belle reminiscently. "D'you remember when you gave me the orange, and then cried for it back?"

Johnny guffawed. "Did I? Oh yes, I *do* remember it," he lied. "And that time as the boss, ol' Byatt, was goin' to cane you, an' I made a hinkpot bounce off 'is nut . . . head, I mean!"

They laughed together, feeling natural for the first time.

"And then he caned you, Johnny, and I wished I could pull his old wig!" said Belle.

"Did you?" whispered Johnny. He spoke in a changed, mournful voice.

"Oh, it's been a long time since, hasn't it?" she pleaded, and again constraint fell upon them like gyves.

"I'll just 'ave a cigarette, if you don't mind, Miss Winterton," said Johnny.

"Not at all," said Belle, and watched him as he lit one of his cheap cigarettes with finished grace.

## *Beginnings*

"Will you 'ave a snatch?" he asked cavalierly in his town voice, offering the flimsy case of cigarettes.

Belle shook her head, thinking with horror of her mother. At the thought she glanced up the Home Field. "Well, I must run along now," she said, holding out a hand for the basket. "Thanks very much for your help, Mr. Waters."

"Just a minute," said Johnny. His mind searched desperately for an excuse. He remembered that Young Jack had been drunk last night, driven to that extremity by the failure of his poultry farm, and the loss of the fifty pounds that Sylvester had not sent. "I was talkin' about the farm to Jack. The poultry. You tell 'im to give 'em middlin's an' Sussex ground oats an' Chicko an' biscuit meal, a different kind every day," he said judiciously. "Yes, a varied diet to meck 'em thrive." And shamelessly turning the conversation. "Y'know it's 'ard work at that shop. I was up 'til eleven las' night, packin' silk—silk an' things. Yes."

"D'you think it'll be a success, Johnny?"

"It's got to be," he said impressively, stealing a quick look at her fair, plump face.

"I hope it will," she said frankly.

"Do you?" he asked in a whisper.

She flushed again, and turned from him. "Of course I do. . . . But I must go now. Good day, and thanks, Mr. Waters."

"Good day, Miss Winterton, an' don't mench! 'Appy to oblige you at any time. Tell Jack about that."

"Yes. Good morning."

"I'm often along this way in the afternoon," he called, with a great appearance of casualness.

"You must buy a lot of Poms!" she cried back in a voice half-choked with laughter.

And then they stood at twenty yards distance and laughed heartily.

"Bye-bye! See you again soon, Belle!" called Johnny boldly.

She nodded, with mirth in her eyes.

"Good-bye, Johnny!" she said, and tripped off up

## *The Golden Milestone*

the Home Field, feeling Johnny's gaze in the small of her back.

And Johnny walked along the lane towards the village with an air of cavalier dignity, feeling Belle's gaze in the small of his back.

And then the larks sang, and flies and bees buzzed about, and the beautiful little lanes grew silently deserted again.

## CHAPTER VIII

### YVONNE

#### I

It had been a fête day, in the early part of September, and all the world and his wife that called the Hill "*chez moi*" were supping at little candle-lit tables within the cosy, tree-enclosed Place du Tertre. The day had been one long stifling crescendo of heat, but, although the air was still warm, little breezes had begun to stir refreshingly amid the dusk.

Sylvester Dawe sat alone at his table upon the edge of the animated crowd. Lanterns of many colours shone in retreat among the trees; plates clattered, glasses tinkled, and diners of all ages chatted and laughed and sang in festive abandon. There were many flowers on the tables, and upon the dresses of the carnival crowd; there were roses upon his table that scented the air about him like a tangible memory of Lovers' Lane. But he sat ungladdened by sight or sound, the devil of loneliness and defeat upon his back, with no desire for his *vin blanc*, with disillusion in his heart.

For he had reached what he fondly believed was a crisis. After the set-back of the sale of the Gipsy Girl he had explained his defeat, and had forthwith chosen his corner of the Parc Monceau for the great picture that should prove to the world of Paris—and incidentally, of Abbott's Crawford—that he had not over-estimated his worth, that the Sylvester Dawe of his inflamed imagination was himself. And the picture had been a failure. . . .

One must allow that, within his limits, he strove hard to realize his ambition. *La Bohème* had been

## *The Golden Milestone*

painted in inhuman concentration; *Parc Monceau* was painted with devilish haste, yet with all the concomitants of self-negation and of bodily hardship and neglect that had marked the painting of the former picture. He starved and worked himself into a partial delirium as he battled against the tragic spectre of futility, that beds persistently with the solitary artist. A month of such tireless, unremitted, stubborn effort had left him weak and nerveless; his dark face, darkened more by the August Parisian sun, had yet an unhealthy whiteness where once it had been sallowly tanned, and his eyes were pouched. He forgot Abbott's Crawford as he worked; forgot the fifty pounds that Jack had been promised; forgot even to write and send his address, careless of the heartache that such silence brought to Granny Mary. Yet, curiously enough, sometimes, in the full stress of his desire, his brush would falter and he would sit considering a girl's face, a dark beautiful face, whose lips were made for tenderness, and in whose eyes the spirit of laughter shone limpidly. He had a curious idea that somewhere he had met that face, the face of Jean's adored, Yvonne; not recently, perhaps not in this life, but somewhere . . . before. . . . He brushed aside the queer, incongruous memory, and returned forthwith to his *Parc Monceau*.

So passed a month, during which time he drank moderately of wine, ate scarcely at all, and battled for his ideal, battled stubbornly, as was his wont, his mental eye ever upon the Jaming figure he was to become in the future. And when the picture was finished he studied it closely, and between it and the original could see not one particle of difference. Yet, in truth, it was hopeless, stiff and dead, with all its life upon its tragi-comic surface. He would have been testy, perhaps deeply offended, had one suggested that he had yet to learn the essential alphabet of his art. He not only ran before he could walk, but before he could crawl. And his vanity, that had killed any critical faculty he might have possessed, had cut him off from even the smallest measure of achievement.

The sequel to his month of effort may be shortly told. He sold his *Parc Monceau*, that had cost thirty francs to paint, for twenty francs, after much bitter haggling, much heart-burning.

Twenty francs. . . .

He sighed, rested his gipsy head upon his hands, and forced back attacks of mental hysteria. His Crawford-made suit of black sat awkwardly about his bunched-up figure. Paris was false, he decided. The Bohemian life a myth. There was nothing of the kind. Perhaps when Murger lived and wrote there was a glorious country of Bohemia, but he even doubted that. Perhaps—nay, probably there was no Murger, and the “*Vie de Bohème*” had been written by some perky Birmingham man; Sylvester had never succeeded in finding the novelist’s grave. The artists and students, he now knew, lived for the most part on the *rive gauche* in the Latin Quartier, where they attended lectures and painted from pictures in the Louvre, or took private lessons from a *maître*, leaving the hill almost abandoned to the hordes of English and American tourists, whom he so constantly met. That was what Montmartre had become—a vulgar sight for tourist eyes, with shrieking catch-penny shows like “Hell” and “Heaven” and the rest of ’em. And he had called it “the Sacred Hill.” He had been a fool to come.

He was shocked at the thought. Already, then? He fiercely answered “Already.” He was ready to return, to return gladly, to Abbott’s Crawford, having decided his artistic fate in less than two months.

The black memory of the *Parc Monceau* returned, and he sighed in hopeless defeat. He would abandon painting, and enjoy his money, and then return to the land where men talked good English, men whose ideas and ideals one could understand. It would be well worth his money to get away from the eternal clack-clack of French mouths. . . .



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### 2

And at the adjoining table a crowd of French youths and maidens supped riotously. They had been to some carnival—what it was he did not know—for they presented a grotesquely coloured and shaped assembly in the yellow light that fell from their table, which bore such an extravagant number of candles that it looked like a chapel in *Sacré Cœur* on fête day. They did not glance at the morose Englishman; the few who knew him knew that he was foolishly proud and vain, that he was self-centred, boorish, provincial. Therefore they ignored him, as they would ignore all things dull.

And a great yearning for companionship was upon him, a yearning that only he who has lived abroad may know. He watched the mad antics of the party with set look. If only Jack had been here! Or one of his Grammar School chums from Ruggenham and Crawford! Or even dear old Johnny Waters! He thought of the villagers and the village, the sweet cool days, the homely news and the homely face that brought it, the glad, infrequent holidays.

A young man, dressed in Louis Seize costume, with stomach and calves shamelessly, ludicrously padded, mounted the table at some risk of injury to his silk stockings from the clustered candles, and sang *La Marseillaise Montmartrois*. Another, whose ruffles, when "shot," incommoded his neighbours, sang a little, succulently sentimental song, the whole party joining their voices in the pathetic chorus.

And then a tall, lean figure in the dress of Mephistopheles, accompanied by a clown, two pierrots and a ballet dancer, appeared within the enclosure, and the carnival party at the table stood up to shout greetings.

Sylvester peered upon the new-comers, incredulous of that great lean figure. Yes, it was Berthe's Anatole! And Yvonne, too. He stared at her face, and forgot to identify the other three. A light was in his heavy eyes.

He was not surprised when she, whose face had returned again and again to his memory, leaped lightly

## Yvonne

upon the table, scattered the candles in her immediate vicinity, and there danced, for some spirit of laughter and gaiety seemed an innate part of her. Her ballet dress was of ivory silk, her lithe, silken legs ended in tiny, red-heeled slippers, and a great feather swayed back proudly from the confining band of *diamante* about her bobbed, chocolate-coloured hair. The candle lights reflected themselves warmly in her silken dress, so that she seemed like some transparent, crimson-crowned, whirling figure of golden light and black shadow—the very, tangible embodiment of the joy of youth, of the exhilaration of conscious beauty and the spirit of fête-madness. So she danced, and to his memory brought the picture-verse from some school-book :

*"First came the primrose.  
Like a dancer at the fair  
She spread her little mat of green  
And on it danced she;  
With a fillet bound about her brow,  
A golden fillet round her brow,  
A fillet round her happy brow,  
And rubies in her hair."*

Yes, "happy brow." . . . He sighed. Never had he felt so miserably alone, never had his provincial *gaucherie* appeared so maddeningly apparent. Vaguely he knew that the eyes of the whole assembly were upon the golden figure that whirled beneath the black sky, and although he would have given his right hand to join the circle at the table, or even to receive a nod of recognition from Jean or Anatole, he dared not move beneath the eye of the crowd. And then his heart jumped. . . .

"Sylvester!" called Jean. And a wonderful thing happened. The dancer seized a glass and silently toasted him before that staring crowd. She did more. Setting down her glass, she leaped lightly down to a chair and up to his table, and there, after a tiny, mocking curtsy, white teeth shining, she danced before him.

It was a tremendous moment. He sat staring up at

## *The Golden Milestone*

her, his dark eyes glowing. At the end of her dance he rose, his face very white as if he had suddenly wakened in paradise, and impelled beyond the bounds of his awkwardness, he seized the roses that had been placed—Montmartroise fashion—in a drinking-glass, and presented them to her.

"Thank you, M'sieu Sylvester!" she said, making him a low curtsy. "Now will you not join us, and not sit in such unhappy fashion on fête-night?"

"Sylvester, come here!" called Jean.

And before he had realized their intent they had seized him, urged him to the table, and there provided him with a seat beside Berthe.

"Wine! Wine!" cried Louis le Roi, of the jocund calves. "Let not an Englishman be serious!"

"But he has no carnival dress!" objected the vulgar Marthe. "It is impossible to be gay, so!"

"There are decorations in plenty!" replied Yvonne, transferring her crimson feather, with mock solemnity, to his straw hat with its strange coloured ribbon (he had not yet noticed that French straw hats bear no colour).

"And here also!" cried Berthe and Louis the King, and in a moment Sylvester was bedecked with gaudy festive apparel. It must be confessed that he looked a ludicrous sight, with his Crawford clothes and white, staring face.

He gulped, still but half-aware of what had happened to him. Rising, with pale, transfigured face, he seized a glass, and raising it high in the air, in face of those many level, foreign stares, he cried: "I drink to Yvonne the Gay!"

Granny Mary and the people of Crawford would not have known him in that moment.

"And that I may drink also, I join with it: 'Sylvester the to-be-gay!'" said Yvonne, with a little chuckle of delight.

And so the incongruous names were joined in a toast, and Sylvester Dawe, looking over his brimming glass, sought and found her eyes, and held their glance for the duration of a delicious second. And, with senses

## Yvonne

tingling, a great, new ambition was born in his heart at that moment.

He tossed down his wine, and called for further bottles, and entered madly into the spirit of the revels. And in response to their mad clamour for a song he drained off his third glass and clambered upon the table and sang the first thing that came into his head, an old Crawford folk-song that he had not sung for many a year :

*"My love had roses in her cheeks,  
Ah my love, and welladay!  
My love had cherries on her lips,  
Welladay, my love, welladay!  
My love hath stolen from me away,  
Ah my love, and lackaday!  
With a gipsy man in a coat so gay,  
Lackaday, my love, lackaday!"*

"More!" cried Jean.

"*De plus!*" cried Anatole.

"*C'est pas mal!*" cried Berthe.

But there were ironical smiles, and grimaces were covertly exchanged, too, at the uncouth sounds. Yvonne sat still. Sylvester reached down for more wine, and sang his song, with not a whit of confused hesitation :

*"My love had neck like any swan,  
Ah my love, and welladay!  
My love had hair of honey-brown.  
Ah my love, and welladay!  
But my love careth naught for me,—  
Ah my love, and lackaday!  
But hath gone with a merry man o'er  
the sea,  
Lackaday, my love, lackaday!"*

And then Anatole sang a little love-song, his languishing eye upon plump Berthe, his hand on his Mephistopheles' heart. And so the revels continued, and Sylvester sat very still, enjoying all, rather hazy in his mind about all but two things, the wonderful face of Yvonne Girard,

## The Golden Milestone

and the necessity to avoid intoxication. And he was not impelled to such avoidance by consideration for the success of his brush.

### 3

They had rioted until the dawn, and Sylvester was supremely happy. He was amazed at the sudden gift of happiness. It was true that Jean Vachez was unduly solicitous of Yvonne's desires, but Sylvester brushed away thought of such rivalry. Had she not come to him of her own free will? It was an omen.

"You will come to the dance at the Bal Montmartre on Thursday evening, m'sieu?" asked Yvonne of him, as the party chattered at the corner of the Rue Antoinette, where the sisters had apartments. "You dance? Yes?"

"No," he said. "But I will take lessons, if mad'moiselle will promise to dance with me!" he said, pressing her hand.

"But yes, M'sieu Sylvester! Good night! Good night, everybody!"

There was a chorus of good nights, and Sylvester noticed that Jean attempted to accompany Yvonne, but was put off by her with a gay phrase that he did not hear. The party split up, and Sylvester, the sturdy Jean, the fop Anatole with his comic moustache, and Edouard, the tall stranger, were left standing at the street corner.

"Alas, I have to return home, to Grenelle!" groaned Jean, his dark, southern face full of self-commiseration.

"Oh, I have left my cigarette-case in Berthe's pocket!" exclaimed Anatole, and without another word he set off down the Rue Antoinette, his long, thin body looking strangely foolish in its black devil's dress.

"Where are you going?" cried Jean, and seemed inclined to follow.

"No, it is time to go home," remonstrated Edouard. "You will be late at your *magasin* to-morrow, my friend."

"Who cares for *magasins* when she is nigh?" said

poor, infatuated Jean, while Sylvester's lids narrowed. "Oh, Edouard, my friend, if you but knew how I love her, how I adore her!"

"You have told me so often," replied Edouard wearily. "Let us go. Good night, M'sieu Sylvester. You will meet us at the dance, is it so? On Thursday?"

"Yes. And thanks for—for to-night—for the pleasure of our meeting," he said, stumbling over his French. "Good night, messieurs!"

As Sylvester was striding away from the sacred street Jean overtook him. Sylvester thought he looked suspicious.

"I forgot to tell you, my dear friend!" said Jean, in a hoarse, resonant whisper, fanning his face with his hat. Sylvester saw that his black hair fitted snugly to his head, like a trim wig. "That girl, that angel, I love her! I adore her! She is to me my life, my soul, my inspiration! Do you understand? Some day she will avow her love for me, and then the gates of paradise will open, and we shall enter! I think of her by day and by night, and she is beside me in imagination as I stand behind my counter in the Boulevard Magenta, selling brushes and paints for that devil Theury! And always she seems to smile upon me, so that I am transfixed by the holy desire of love! . . . Can you lend me ten francs?"

"No," said Sylvester, with immense satisfaction. "I can't. Good night!" And he set off, not towards Montmartre, but towards the Cité, and did not wait to see the effect of his brusquerie.

He wanted to be away from that facile tongue, and away from the busy turmoil of the hill. The quieter streets towards the river suited better his mood. Something wonderful had happened to him, and he desired silence and space for uninterrupted thought of Her. He wanted to become familiar with the new world that opened about him.

Arrived at the Place de Châtelet he crossed to the river side, and leaned upon the parapet of the bridge. Her image was ever before him, and he was drunk

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with love, or he would have noticed the quiet, unearthly beauty of the dawn upon the dark waters that slipped smoothly, swiftly, silently away to the sea. The towers of Notre Dame stood out black against the dawning, where, over St. Denis, the sky paled and a quiet morning beauty was born. But not for him. . . .

Her wonderful dark features and lithe limbs, her piquant, vivacious, Gallic tongue, the slender mystery of her body! . . .

Painting? Who cared a curse for painting? Had Rembrandt such glory beneath his hand? Murger? Murger had never dreamed one half so much beauty! His book was pale and futile beside this reality. Murger? Murger knew naught of such wonders!

Yvonne! Yvonne!

His heart sang the gracious name as he writhed in love's ecstasy, mooning at half-past four upon the bridge above the Seine.

### 4

"And what do you think of your Englishman, *mignon*?" asked Berthe of her sister, as they disrobed in their tiny bedroom in the Rue Antoinette.

"My Englishman?" mused Yvonne. "He is a very good-looking man, let me tell you."

"But what awkwardness! He moves and speaks as does a very old crow! Yet is he another conquest, my sister."

"Ah, but you are amusing!" laughed Yvonne. "You think that all are my conquests! He was grateful that we asked him to join us, but yes. And then you call him another conquest! The poor man would not dare *think*, even, of love, and an embrace would shock him. . . . 'Shocking'!" she said in English, with a grin. "Yet I do not know. He is clumsy, certainly, yet his face has that that many have not."

"What do you mean?"

Yvonne mused over him, her fingers mechanically tying

the cord about her pyjamas. "There is something in his face—passionate, yes. And you must admit that he has a handsome face, my dear."

"Handsome than Jean?" queried Berthe, in a curious tone, her glance resting slyly upon her beautiful sister.

"Jean! He is naught to me. Ah, you and your Anatole! *You!* You think always of love and marriage! (*Do get into bed!*) As if one could have children and still enjoy life!"

Berthe switched off the light, and chuckled comfortably as she got into bed. "If I have the choice I should think not of pleasure, dear," she said. "Yet would children be of more worth than all your pleasures, I think."

Yvonne grimaced insincerely in the dark. "Why, are there not enough women in the world to have children but *you* must wish to join them?" she asked teasingly. "For me—the gay time, much company, and many carnivals. Children? Poof!"

Berthe chuckled again, but rather sleepily this time. "Ah, you will alter your tune one day, my angel," she said. "Jean? He is cool, is he not?"

"Jean? Why Jean, Jean, Jean?" said Yvonne scornfully.

"The Englishman, then?" said Berthe slyly.

"The Englishman? Ah, there is a handsome head for you! But what awkwardness! No airs, no manners, no graces. . . . It is already half-past four by the bell, Berthe."

"And I am very tired, my sister."

"Good morning, then. God guard you."

"Sleep well, *mignon*."



## CHAPTER IX

### THE AWAKENING

#### I

ON Thursday night, a warm, close night, he sat at a little table in the Bal Montmartre, and perspired with mortification. He had tried three several times to dance (twice, unfortunately, with Yvonne), and each time he had blundered unforgivably. Dancing in the Bal Montmartre was a very different thing from dancing in the barn at Abbott's Crawford, where they yet thought the Japanese Veleta and the Maxina the last words in modern dancing. But here they never danced! They merely walked and slid along the floor, and played strange tricks with their shoulders and feet!

He called for another bock, and stretched out his long legs, crossing the big feet that were encased in dancing pumps. He viewed himself, and particularly his feet, with indignant distaste. He was well dressed, even down to a scrap of figured *crêpe-de-Chine* in the breast pocket of his Paris-made suit, he looked very handsome and presentable if one overlooked a certain blueness of chin, and a tendency to sprawl, yet in spite of his looks he wished himself back in his bedroom in the Place du Tertre, his cherrywood pipe in his mouth, his old shapeless tweeds upon him, and his split, toasted slippers on his feet. His fingers touched his unshaven chin, where a black, stubby growth, like a funereal rash, marked the beginning of a beard. Bah! What, in God's name, did he want with a beard?

It had been for her that he had overcome a natural aversion to the fashionable growth, for her that he had haunted the shops of the barbers, the perfumers, the

## *The Awakening*

tailors and hatters, for her that he had stifled the warnings of his inner monitor to venture not into the intricacies of French dances. And this was the result! To sit gasping, like a fish out of water, before the quick, amused glances of these brainless Frenchmen and stony-eyed French girls, all of whom, save only Yvonne, seemed remote, impenetrable, almost without personality in his eyes. But Yvonne, charmingly mysterious as she was, seemed at the same time familiar, knowable, like all wonderful things. He was wretched that he could not shine in her eyes, that he could not recapture that strange devil-may-care spirit of the fête night. He would do anything to win her love, *anything!* Even a beard! . . . He groaned.

The professional dancers of the Bal Montmartre were dancing the can-can—six lightly clad, lithe, conventionally smiling girls with a weariness behind their smiles. His glance wandered beyond their unseductive shapeliness to the back of Yvonne's head, where she sat chattering, the gayest of the group about her. And as he looked she turned, and broke away from her companions to come to him.

He inbreathed deeply, bracing himself with a shuffling movement. She was wonderful, he thought, as, clad in her jade dancing dress, she approached him. Her dark, beautiful face wore a comrade's smile.

"You are tired?" she said, seating herself at his table.

"No. Not at all. What will you drink, Yvonne?" he said. It was one of his clumsy moments.

"Bock, from your glass!" she replied, laughing to give him ease. "You are enjoying it?"

"The dance? Oh, yes!" he said miserably.

"You will dance again? You are getting better. Truly, you will dance beautifully," she said, but her glance was less frank than its wont.

"You speak so to please me," he said, hardly daring to look at her. "I don't think I shall ever be able to dance, as Jean Vachéz there, for example."

She pouted in pleasant disagreement. "Oh, but you

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will, m'sieu ! You must not be discouraged, or you will not learn, and so will be unable to enjoy yourself with us. All the world dances in Paris. I love it ! . . . You must try again, M'sieu Sylvester."

"Do you think I might learn?" he asked humbly. It was a tone that Abbott's Crawford would not have recognized.

"But yes, certainly !"

He inspired deeply, grateful for the heartening words, but more grateful for the gift of her presence. "Yes, I will try again, if you will dance with me, and forgive my many mistakes."

"That is good," she said, when her mind grasped his meaning. Her glance took in shrewdly the lines of his figure, and rested almost diffidently upon his gipsy head. "You paint in the day-time?"

"Yes. No," he stammered. "Not now. I have given it up. I'm no good as a painter."

She thought she heard regret in his voice. "It is folly to think so," she said. "You have been painting long? You have been to the Sorbonne?"

"No. I've only been in France two months."

"What have you painted?"

He described briefly his two pictures.

"You do figures, too?" she asked, rummaging in her memory for the catch-phrases of the Hill.

"I've done one or two. But they're no good."

"Ah, but you must have a model!" she exclaimed. "Good work is not done without a model."

They sat in silence for a moment, while the jazz band rose to a shriek and the musicians varied the monotony of playing by emitting violent yells at pre-arranged notes. Suddenly a bold thought came to him. She was swaying gently to the rhythm of the dance. He leaned forward, and she bent a serious, intent young face towards him. "Will you not sit for me?" he asked. "As my model?"

She smiled with pleasure, but immediately a doubt possessed her. "In what character does m'sieu desire to paint me?" she said.

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He studied her, and a faint flush, whose meaning he did not divine, crept into her dark, beautiful face.

"As a Gipsy Girl," he said at last.

"Oh!" she said, and moistened her lips, as if in relief.

"But yes! . . . But am I not too thin for the part? No? Oh, it will be delightful!"

Her eyes sparkled, and a dull flush burned in his cheek in answer to the colour in hers. "It would be splendid . . . having you so," he stammered, disturbed with pleasure at the prospect.

She stared quizzically into his face; perhaps there was a hint of appraisement in her brown eyes. "It is a bargain, m'sieu. . . . But now I must go, for Jean is beckoning me, I see. And, of course, you will dance? . . . I am engaged for this, but you shall have the fox-trot. You will not dance this one?"

"No. I'll wait for the dance with you," he said earnestly. The professional dancers sank into various ungraceful postures on the floor of the ball-room, to the accompaniment of hilarious cries of "*Bis!*" from the young men. "When shall we begin, mad'moiselle?"

"The fox-trot?"

"No. To paint you?"

She rose, laughing. "M'sieu is anxious to begin. Not to-morrow; you must come to the Bal Tabarin to dance to-morrow. But on Saturday I shall be free. . . . On Saturday afternoon, at five o'clock, we will say?"

"You will come to my room?"

"Ah, no! . . . Come to our room in the Rue Antoinette. . . . And you will refuse me as your model after the first sitting!"

"Pardon?" he said.

She repeated her jest, speaking very slowly and patiently.

"Oh, no! Not after the hundred and first!" he said hoarsely.

"Oh, la la!" She smiled and turned away. "Ah, well, I must go. Remember, the next dance."

"Yes, thanks, mad'moiselle."

"*Au revoir!*" she said, and left him.

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He watched her retreat, and wondered at the stolid faces of the dancers as she passed. She walked divinely, in quick, short steps, her lithe body seeming to swim between the rows of waiting couples. He sighed with desire. He thought with delight, yet guiltily, of his plan to paint her. The scheme had attractions that inclined him without nausea to the brush he had abandoned. It would be all pretence, of course, and fortunately Yvonne could know little of the art. . . . But *would* it be pretence? With Yvonne to paint one might do anything! A faint thrill ran through him at the thought, like a last echo of his former ambition. But the thrill was merely faint; his ambition was wellnigh dead, for the coming of Yvonne had displaced it with a greater ambition, no less than the winning of Yvonne.

The winning of Yvonne! The thought staggered his mental equanimity, and stirred in his mind the first delicate seedlings of the plant that might bear the flower of sympathy, the quality he so sadly lacked. His many previous love affairs had been as self-full as his life; he had not striven to understand the hearts of Marion Briscoe and his other Staffordshire loves. He had set up each as he might have set up a painted masterpiece, before which, and in the full consciousness of himself and the picturesqueness of his attitude, he might worship. But this dark, slender French girl differed from his Staffordshire loves as the sun from the candle; she differed, in some remarkable way, from all the world of womenkind. She stirred him to questionings: love for her demanded knowledge and a godlike, complete sympathy. She was for him the most wonderful happening of his life, familiar yet completely secret, hidden from him by her foreignness and by his own self-full vanity. He realized that he was utterly unworthy of her love—an eloquent realization—but he saw nothing incongruous in his desire to marry her; love, it seems, is sublime egoism, as it is sublime humility and self-negation.

But although, in this manner, he began to reach out tentative fingers from the prison of his vanity, he was still behind the bars. He had considered Yvonne as his

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wife, had even considered her—preposterous sight!—presiding at his farmer's table at Abbott's Crawford, without being alarmed at the incongruous elements of the vision. He was still in the centre of his stage, yet every hour that passed since that wonderful night in the Place du Tertre enabled Yvonne to trespass more and more, and there might come a day when he should view her from the wings. He was learning the old lesson that love casteth out self. But he was a dense student of aught but the subject of clumsy, picturesque Sylvester Dawe.

When the fox-trot was announced he crossed the room to her side. And with her smiling face in close proximity to his tremulous heart they moved off to the music of the jazz orchestra—like Beauty and the Beast, the onlookers thought, or like a wooden marionette beside a dainty mannequin. Yet more than one feminine glance dwelt in musing admiration upon the wild, coarse appeal of his gipsy head.

"Better and better every minute, like Coué, M'sieu Sylvester!" Yvonne whispered gaily in his ear.

He smiled upon her, unable to find a word of reply, so incoherently spoke his heart.

### 2

Yvonne and Berthe occupied a bedroom and a small sitting-room in the *entresol* of number thirty-nine in the Rue Antoinette, that leads southwards from the Rue de Maubeuge to the Rue de Lafayette. Sylvester discovered that the sisters were orphans, without family connexions in Paris; that they had been born in Brive, Corrèze, where their parents had died and left the young girls to the care of their maiden Aunt Simone, who had been lady's maid to the Duchesse d'Eylincourt, and was then living upon her pension in a small house at Suresnes, down the river. When Yvonne was fourteen, and Berthe a year older, Aunt Simone had died, and since that calamitous event the sisters had worked for a scant living in Paris, Yvonne first as a sempstress and then as a model in the

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Rue de Rivoli, Berthe as a waitress at a cheap restaurant in the Rue Rambuteau. They had a mixed circle of working-class friends, and took their delights in the gay, economical fashion of all grisettes. The stout, pleasant Berthe, he discovered, was easy-going but shrewd. Yvonne was more *spirituelle*; she loved flowers and colours, he found, and pretty frocks (she was a little vain of her wardrobe, that had cost so much effort to buy), and when she danced or sang or played in the evenings with her Montmartre friends one might have personified Gaiety in her person. She drank freely, finding no harm in wine except over-indulgence, and laughed much, and was ever to be seen engaged upon some unconventional frolic, so that some people of the Hill thought that she was frail, and that had not Berthe, the ever-watchful Berthe, been her sister she would long ago have joined the unhappy sisterhood, like Marthe, her friend. But the judgment was false, as are most outside judgments; beneath her gaiety was a shrewd, level mind, and a purity that dared walk the unconventional path without tremors. Only Berthe knew the many little sacrifices of Yvonne for their mutual comfort; of the affection that lay beneath her careless laughter; only Berthe knew that Yvonne associated with Marthe, in spite of the Hill's insinuations, because of her pitiful desire to reinstate Marthe in her womanhood. Only Berthe knew the real Yvonne that was hidden behind the mad gaiety of Yvonne of the Hill. Pleasure she loved, it is true, and the lights of Paris and its gay night life were her heart's delight. But Berthe knew comfortably that when love came to her the lover would find more in his mistress than a madcap of Montmartre.

The sitting-room in the Rue Antoinette was a small, square room that looked out by a balconied window upon the narrow street and the market stalls far below in the well of the street. It was furnished with a small table, a capacious cupboard, a hired piano, three low, comfortable chairs, and a silent ormolu clock above the tiny fireplace. Except that, having been long in the occupation of women, it had a certain feminine air, certain

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touches of colour, and certain small items of comfort, it was very much like Sylvester's room in the Place du Tertre. It was a draughty, pleasant little place, its sole pictures being fashion plates and picture postcards of opera stars and *chansonneurs*. There were gay cushions on the chairs, brightly coloured copies of dance music on the piano, and a vase of rather dried mimosa blossom on the mantelpiece. The table bore trivia: a soiled pierrot's hat, an empty chocolate carton, two long white knotted gloves, a couple of ladies' fashion papers containing many unbound plates, a melon, and a paper bag filled with plump aubergines.

Here, three weeks after the meeting at the Bal Montmartre, Sylvester stood before his easel while Yvonne sat still as a mouse in the afternoon light, posing for the picture. A shawl of crimson and gay yellow was about her shoulders, which her bobbed hair scarcely brushed, and against it her beautiful dark skin showed at its best, like a pencil-grey crocus, if one can imagine such a wonder. Her feet, extended carelessly before her, were crossed, and her fingers played with a chaplet of Chinese metal beads of jade and turquoise colours. So she had sat for four sittings, seeing him impatiently striving to realize his vision of her. Save for his irritable exclamations and the clumping of his great feet there was no sound in the room. He was dressed as perfectly as Jean Vachez, his coat extravagantly waisted and skirted, his spotless linen sprinkled with tiny blue silk flowers, and an unexpected crease appeared upon each trouser leg. He was becoming a dandy, and if the people at the farm could have seen him at that moment there would have been a universal gasp of astonishment. And upon his chin was a tiny rough beard that Yvonne secretly adored.

Sometimes she glanced wearily towards the window, but he gave no thought to her fatigue. He had so far retrograded from his former acceptance of defeat that, under the artificial stimulus of her presence, he was frenziedly endeavouring to portray her living beauty, oblivious of all else.

But upon this afternoon, whose thin sunlight seemed



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to promise a break in the spell of heat, his irritation seemed to grow. She could not understand his constant, despairful mutterings. Suddenly, after standing in deep dejection before the canvas, he threw down his brushes and deliberately snapped his palette between his great country hands.

"*Mon Dieu!*" Yvonne murmured in affright.

"It's no use! It is impossible!" he said bitterly. "When I daub you like this it is—it is an insult to you!"

She rose, sighing gently, and crossed to look at the painting. Her eyes strove hard to assess its worth at a higher degree than her mind suggested. The shawl and beads were perfect, of this she was certain, but in her secret admissions she could not recognize herself in the conventional face, and knew, too, that Berthe thought the same. Indeed, her sister had been very jocose about the ultimate object of the sittings.

"You are hasty," she said. "It is not so bad as that." And suddenly she smiled up at him. "Perhaps m'sieu would be more successful with a handsomer model!" she said.

He stared at her, the blood creeping up into his gipsy face. The smile left her lips; a look, as of fear, appeared in her eyes. She wished now that Berthe had not gone to the *Trois Petits Porcs* with Anatole.

"You have all the beauty that I desire, Yvonne!" he replied hoarsely.

There was silence for a moment, and the sunlight died out of the room like a candle that is put out. They could hear the raucous voice of the *femme* engaged in some exciting argument below. Then Yvonne shrugged, and, smiling with an attempt at gaiety, she said: "Oh, la la! M'sieu is gallant, truly! But is it not time that we had our 'five-o'clock'? It is long past the hour. I wonder when Berthe will return. M'sieu will stay for tea, please?"

He was staring strangely upon her, taking no heed. He crossed to her side, and his gipsy lips were within an inch of her cheek as he said: "Yvonne!"

She retreated, her face paling, her hand rising to her

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breast as if in protection. "M'sieu? . . . But come, you are very fatigued with work——!"

"No, I care not a—centime about painting!" he said. "I want to tell you—to say to you—— Oh, it is difficult in your language! *Difficult!* . . . But, Yvonne . . . I love you, Yvonne!"

The inevitable moment came. Dead silence fell between them, and below, the world, in the person of the raucous-voiced *femme*, seemed to keep silence too. His pulses raced.

She was staring away from him to the window, where a few bright splashes heralded the rain. The room had grown dark.

"Yvonne——" he began, taking her hand.

"No, no!" she cried in distress, yet endeavouring still to be just to him and to herself. "No . . . it is impossible! M'sieu must understand . . . No, no! M'sieu is English, and I scarcely know you, and—— No, think no more of it! I do not love you! . . . It is impossible that I can! . . ."

"You mean, definitely . . . that you do not care for me?"

"Yes. I do not! . . . Oh, you should not have asked me! You are . . . foolish to think so! It is impossible!"

He turned from her to the door. "God!" he muttered in English, and she drew away from him, yet kept her look on his face, for he was a strange sight, his gipsy face inflamed with the pain of his rejection.

"M'sieu——?"

"Yes?" he said dully, half turning.

"Ah, do not be miserable because of this! It is not worth it!" she said. "M'sieu Sylvester!"

He stared foolishly, but did not reply, ignoring her pleading. He was thinking of himself, and of his bruised heart. He turned and left her. . . .

After the sound of his great feet had passed from the stairs she stood staring at the door, but with unseeing eyes. And the shadow of the rain fell upon the room. She was very pale and wretched. She turned and

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approached the canvas, and touched it tenderly, careless of the wet paint. And at last she sought refuge upon the raised chair in which she had sat for him, and there, with her beautiful face buried in the gay shawl, she wept in abandon, not knowing why she wept.

### 3

And there Berthe found her, and quickly pierced to the heart of her secret.

"You do not love him? . . . He is nothing to you? . . . Yet you weep? . . . Ah, he is not worth your tears!" she said indignantly, shaking the rain from her chic cloak. "You do not love him?"

"No," said Yvonne, in a stifled voice.

"But you weep?"

And then Yvonne rose up, distraught. "Ah, do not question me so!" she cried in bitter appeal. "How can I love him, he so clumsy, he and his great English feet and stupid tongue, he and his very clumsiness of soul? . . . He thinks of naught but of himself! And of his foolish painting! . . . Ah, I hate it!" she ended, thrusting a small clenched fist right through the painted canvas. "He and his avowals! . . . He loves me not! He loves but himself, and his own desires! How, then, can I love him, my sister? . . . Ah, it is impossible! . . . And yet, I do not know why it is that I weep, unless it is that I regret. . . . I am truly a fool!"

"You could not marry such a man!" said Berthe scornfully, putting anxious arms about her sister. "The big cow!"

"He is not so bad as that, Berthe! . . . And I *could* marry him if—if——!"

"Yes?"

"Ah, I know not! Perhaps, were he French. . . ."

Berthe stared, surprised at the words. Then: "Come, dear, you are not well," she said, raising her from her weeping posture. "Come and rest while I prepare a cup

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of coffee. No, we will have a bottle of wine! . . . It is not like you to be so, just because of your sweetheart."

"My sweetheart!" said Yvonne bitterly, a sob in her voice.

### 4

And all through the long dusk, while the rain thrashed a presage of wintry desolation against the window that looked out upon the Place du Tertre, Sylvester Dawe sat in wild, abandoned grief, his dark face working spasmodically. His throat was dry, and the taste had gone out of life. He had a curious half-idea that his heart was weak, for its leaden thumping left him with choked lungs and a sensation as if something dreadful would happen inside his head, some curious aberration of his mental machine, so strong was the pulse in his temples.

The world was dead!

Yvonne! Yvonne! He murmured the name, his lips contracted with pain.

And curiously enough, he had forgotten to think of himself and of his poor bruised vanity. It was of her that he thought, and the thought was a new sensation—more poignant, more bitter. It brought no light emotion, this refusal, as his other loves had done; it was not a thing to posture about in melancholy poses, but something that hurt both physically and mentally, that bit into him like a cancer, tearing aside all imposture and the sweet melancholy of what he had called "love." This was altogether new and startling, and by its acuteness demanded immediate alleviation. He had woven dream women out of gossamer, and suddenly one had breathed life and stabbed him! And it was no romantic wound; he was hurt, prosaically hurt, mortified and wounded. And the startling thing about it was that he still loved her, that he was still unresentful, that his knee was still bent, his breast still bare, to her blows!

It is probably true that Yvonne's refusal of him was the first effective blow to his all-consuming self-fulness.

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Dimly through his grief he saw the paradoxical nature of the lover, who vaunts his mistress to the stars, who casts himself—metaphorically, and with a suitable gesture—in the dust to be trodden upon by the adored feet, and who is yet mightily affronted at the unwillingness of his goddess to submit body and soul to his discretion at the first word of love. He recognized this blind conceit, and was by so much the gainer. And at last he realized that in spite of his assumed humility he had rated his worth too highly. Such as Yvonne (if by any chance there *could* be others) were not won to a man's hearth at the first essay.

He staggered beneath the blow, for it fell with deadly effect upon that tender spot, his ignorant vanity, but his native obstinacy, a kind of blind fool-hardiness, brought him to his feet and back to the encounter. He loved her deeply. She was the Golden Girl who had flitted elusively through his youthful dreams, leaving behind a charming memory, but nothing tangible for waking moments to grasp. He flushed with the thought of her. It seemed—the idea persisted—as if they had met and loved before, somewhere long ago, before time. Yet he knew little about her actual self; to the people of the Manor Farm his knowledge of her origin and upbringing and inner life would have seemed ridiculously scanty. But he experienced no sense of such limitation; she was she, divinely mysterious, divinely familiar. Of her *personal* life in the past he was ignorant, and desired to know only in so far as lovers desire, without suspicion. He accepted her as of different metal from the frail Marthe, who seemed ever to be upon the point of taking unto herself another sardonically named protector; he decided so, and rightly. Yvonne was as loyal to herself as Marion Briscoe, however gaily she might accept life. Sometimes he thought of the old love and the new, the fair English blonde and the dark Parisienne, both so frank and yet so secret, and then he realized the inevitableness of Yvonne. She was the crown that God had meant to set upon his life.

But *had* God meant it?

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He groaned at the doubt. Her refusal had first bitterly angered him, but humiliation quickly followed, and for a week, while the sun crept lower to its winter position, while the leaves fell thick and fast in the parks and boulevards, and the mornings grew steadily colder, he sought by an unflinching examination of himself to discover the holes in his armour. He was English, and awkward in body and in speech, and perhaps in very thought. But there was more than that. He braced himself to the acceptance of the final failing, his vain conceit of himself.

"I think too much of myself," he phrased it miserably. He saw that throughout his life he had been selfish and vain. He decided that he would write to Crowmarsh and send that money, and tell them all about it. Granny would be worried. . . . He seemed to see the farm folk with clear eyes, and for the first time since he had left it the picture of the dark little kitchen appeared to him in all its detail. And Aunt Deborah, too. It seemed as if he could find sympathy for her, as if he could get behind the grim face. . . . Or was he just imagining all this?

They met again by chance in the Boulevard Haussmann, and in consequence there were other meetings at the Bal Tabarin and the Bal Montmartre—the sittings were tacitly abandoned, and his brush with them—until it seemed that they had recovered their previous status. But things were never quite as they had been. In dress, in appearance, he became French—a magnificently bearded, black-avised, full-blooded Frenchman, coloured for a sensual man, a dandy of the first water, yet awkwardly poised in his immaculate clothes. He had cut his insular and agricultural corns with unflinching courage.

And Yvonne?

Always she seemed to be watching him slyly, with something like fear in her eyes. She was uneasy, restless, moody. Recognizing plainly his gross limitations, appalled sometimes by the clumsiness in him that his halting French served to accentuate, she yet could not think of him, as she ought, with contemptuous indiffer-

## *The Golden Milestone*

ence. Something in his address, that curious suggestion of wild licence he bore as a bequest from his gipsy father, called to her with no uncertain voice, and yet, at the same time, it unsettled and frightened her. It was the incalculable quality that both repelled and attracted her. There was a faint suggestion of Oriental mystery about him, and when he had spoken of love, when she had glimpsed for a moment the fierce nomad looking out upon her, she had been shaken by a physical desire to submit to his fierce embrace, to speak passionately of love. And only her native honesty withheld her.

Yet, in spite of these thoughts of treason, love was still far from her heart. She was physically finely strung, mentally alert and delicate, and the clod in him weighed heavily upon her light spirits.

But she was disturbed. And when they met she felt an embarrassment that seemed ridiculous, and a reproach for his hurt glances, as he went about a cautious siege of her heart, that she knew undeserved. Slowly his tongue freed itself from its initial difficulties with the language, slowly he learned to imitate, at least, their modes of thought, their zests and their dislikes. Perhaps, he thought, he had spoken too soon? And she? She watched him, weighed him, strove to pierce down behind the mystery of his coarse appeal. *Was* he sensual, a *passionné*, and nothing more? Or was there a heart behind the colouring? Could she trust herself to him? Not until she knew more of what lay behind the handsome face. She thought about him oftener than she had ever thought of such as Jean, but after the outburst that followed her refusal of him she said not one unnecessary word concerning him to her sister Berthe.

## CHAPTER X

### JOHNNY SOLVES A DIFFICULT PROBLEM

RETURNING from the village with Belle, Johnny Waters stopped at the bridge over the Abbey river, and deposited Belle's basket upon the coping. "Let's 'ave a minute," he said cavalierly.

Belle smiled. "No use, Johnny. We're late already," she said. "What with you taking me round that shop of yours. Mother will be ratty if I'm late. You know how she is."

"Just five minutes!" pleaded Johnny. "Come on; I won't 'ave no noes!" And he lifted her up to the coping.

"Johnny!" she called in affright. "You are an idiot!" He vaulted up beside her, and swung his long thin legs over the bridge. "Mind! You'll fall in!"

"Turn this way. It's better," he said.

"No. I'm frightened of the water."

"Come on. I'll 'old you." He assisted her to turn, and his assisting arm remained forgetfully about her waist. "That's better, don't y' think? . . . Give us a kiss!"

"I'm sure I shan't!"

"I shall push you in the river, then!" he said. And adopting a stage voice: "One kiss from thy ruby lips, maiden, or to the bottom thou goest, yea, even unto the tadpoles!" His laugh blared out through his long nose. "Kiss me, like a nice little wife!"

And Belle, overcome by the new endearment, allowed herself to be kissed in broad daylight, with Sally Twittens and Old Mobberleys behind every bush. Thereafter they mused, head leaning to head, his arm about her, their hearts beating in happy content. Before them the Home Field rolled down to the Abbey river, and trees crowned



## *The Golden Milestone*

the view. The hedges were almost bare of leaves, and the last few leaves upon the trees looked like little yellow lanterns against the grey October sky. Late buttercups glistened with rain in the fields, and about the riverside a few fragile lady-smocks, like tip-tilted sky fragments, were scattered. At their feet the little river gurgled about its rushes, and whispered to the little white watercress flowers that bloomed along its banks; it bore scraps of hay and nettle sprays, and sometimes a rose-hip or a cluster of mountain-ash berries. A blue tit watched the sparrows from the hedge; swallows were taking their last flights; and blackbirds and peewits and rooks sailed above the newly ploughed land. The little morning wind was warm, and the yellow chrysanthemums at Belle's breast scented the air with an acrid, pineapple odour.

"We must be going," said Belle. "What's worrying you, Johnny? Chickens again?" He nodded. "Oh, don't bother about it. Come on!"

"Not just yet," pleaded Johnny, rousing himself from a pleasant reverie. "You know, Belle, I don't think there's nobody got such a nice mouth as you."

"Humph!" she said.

"No. Not for kissin', any'ow. Some gels just peck, like, I mean."

"Oh!"

"Not peck proper! Not *bite*, I don't mean! Haw! Haw! No, I like proper kisses, like yours, Belle."

"Oh," she said coolly.

He stared at her, and then squirmed as he knew her thought. "Not—not as I kiss 'em meself," he said off-handedly. "But that's what I bin told."

"Oh . . . I think we'll go now."

Johnny took her face into the crook of his arm. "What's the idea?" he asked.

"Why? . . . Oh, mother will be ratty."

"No, it ain't that. What is it?"

"Nothing."

"It is."

She stared at him for a moment, and then looked

## *Johnny Solves a Difficult Problem*

down. "Well, you must know what it is without asking. If that's how you carry on when you're out of my sight——"

Johnny kissed her. "Belle——!"

"No. You mustn't!"

"Belle darling, my own little duck——!"

She chuckled, in spite of her displeasure. "Oh, Johnny, you fool!" she said.

"Kiss me!" he said, and she kissed him, smiling very tenderly.

"Let's go up the field," he said. "It's shorter. Here, y' can get over the fence, Belle."

"But—if mother sees us?"

Johnny's face darkened. "I'll on'y come up as far as the top," he said.

"All right. We must hurry, Johnny. Where's the basket?"

But Johnny stood still.

"Lift the basket down, Johnny," she said.

"Oh, Belle!" he gasped, and turned a white, excited face towards her, the great rabbit teeth exposed by the drooping underjaw.

"What's the matter?"

"Belle!" he gasped.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Belle . . . *Ducks!*" he gasped.

"What?"

"Ducks! Ducks! . . . I called you one! What I called you! . . . Come on! Where's that basket? . . . 'Ere, follow me, I want to see Jack, quick! . . . No, give me y'r arm, Belle! Run! Run!"

"Oh, Johnny!"

"Run, Belle! . . . *DUCKS!*" he gasped, as they staggered up through the buttercups. "Well, damme!"

"Johnny!" she cried, and stopped.

"Sorry, Belle! But——"

"You swore!"

"Did I? It don't matter! I mean—— Come on, Belle! Run! It means money! P'raps it means You and Me, Belle! Come on, Belle! Run!" And grab-

## The Golden Milestone

bing her arm he raced on, the laden basket swaying from his hand.

At the top of the hill, where Jack saw them, Johnny turned, his hatchet face pointing to the river, his little eyes roving along its course. "Look! Canna y' see? Ducks! Nobody keeps 'em 'ere. . . . Khaki Campbells and Indian Runners! . . . Thousand on 'em, all over the field, crowds, ridgements on 'em! All quackin'!"

"Where? What d' y' mean?"

"What I said! Not now, *soon!* . . . 'The Excelsior Duck Company, Limited'! . . . Thousands of eggs, millions, millions! . . . A Corner! . . . Come on, Belle!"

Jack looked up, wondering at their appearance. He stood on the drive, and held something carefully in his hand.

"Jack!" called Johnny, careless of Mrs. Winterton.

"What's the matter?" Jack said, a glad smile on his face. "How d'you know?"

"Know what?" asked Belle.

"About this!" He showed a registered envelope containing fifty pounds in notes. "Who told you?"

"Oh, Jack! Has Sylvie——?"

"No, it ain't that, Jack!" said Johnny. "It's ducks! Ducks!" And as Belle sped off to the house to tell her mother and Granny Mary of the coming of the fifty pounds Johnny bent nearer to Jack, and his face perspired as he outlined his scheme. Water, grass-land and marsh were at their door, and now Jack had the necessary capital to float the scheme. A light burned in Jack's blue eyes.

"Johnny! Johnny!" he said hoarsely. "You've struck it! But not Khaki Campbells! Aylesbury ducks dressed for the market, and sold at a cut price in the towns! . . . Johnny!"

Johnny smote his bony knee, his eyes staring from his face. "Gawd!" he said in the excess of his emotion.

"And you must come into it, Johnny!" said young Jack.

"Me? D'you mean that?"

"Of course."

## *Johnny Solves a Difficult Problem*

"Then it's me for the biz!" cried Johnny, elongating his thin figure triumphantly. Then his face fell and his muscles relaxed. "But I got no money, y'know," he said. "That shop ain't doin' well."

"Well, you carry on with the shop until I've got it started, and then you shall come in as soon as you see that the shop's a failure. How's that?" said Jack.

"That's the ticket, mister!" cried Johnny. "Why we'll be rollin' round in Rolls-R'ycles afore long! For meself I'd rather 'ave a nice gig an' a young tit about fifteen 'ands. . . . But I must clear off." He had sighted Aunt Deborah rounding the wing. "Cheero!"

"What's ae want?" asked Aunt Deborah, glancing at Johnny's narrow back. "Is it true that Sylvie's sent that money?"

He showed her the packet of notes, and a smile came to her lips, so that she looked quite pleasant. They turned the corner of the house, talking eagerly, her grim face softening, her tiny, brilliant eyes retaining an incongruously pleasant smile.

But he did not see it. He was thinking of Marion Briscoe and of the future.

## CHAPTER XI

### NEW YEAR'S MORNING

#### I

THE new year was scarcely three hours old when Sylvester Dawe and Yvonne stood taking leave of their friends at the corner of the Rue Antoinette. There had been a mad dance at the *Trois Petits Porcs* in Montparnasse, and already a cold morning light fell upon the flushed faces of the revellers.

"You return to a cold bed, my dear!" said frail Marthe to Yvonne. Berthe and Anatole had gone to view a café that was to let at Suresnes, and would not be home until to-morrow. "But since you have M'sieu Sylvester . . . !"

"Come, Yvonne," he interrupted, glowering at the speaker.

"You see, m'sieu becomes impatient!" laughed Marthe.

Jean Vachez laughed drunkenly, his heavy glance upon Yvonne.

"Go away, shameless one!" Yvonne replied, smiling indulgently, but avoiding Sylvester's look. "But it is cold, this ninth arrondissement! Let us go. . . . Good morning, everybody!"

"A happy new year!" they called.

"We meet in the morning, Yvonne!" said Marthe, kissing her effusively. Sylvester glanced away from the kiss.

They went, leaving both Sylvester and the persistent boxer with Yvonne. As she was retreating Marthe turned, and a quick, amused smile came to her lips. She spoke to her companions, and they turned and suddenly laughed out together.

## New Year's Morning

Yvonne and Jean waved to them. Sylvester glowered blackly; he could not understand Yvonne's toleration of Marthe.

"Come, Yvonne," he said almost impatiently.

He took her arm, and Jean took the other, and they strolled down to Yvonne's door. All three had taken wine.

"Where is Edouard?" asked Yvonne presently.

"He was joyous, so joyous that he could not walk!" Jean replied, lurching against her.

"He was making a beast of himself when I saw him," said Sylvester. Jean's continued persistence irritated him. "Why didn't you take him home?"

"I? It is not for me to interfere between him and his friends! I am not English, I!" he sneered. "Besides, the lady was drunk, too, and I could not carry off both of them at once!"

Yvonne laughed. Sylvester, glancing his suspicion, sighed at her fresh morning beauty. She was clad in a great coat and furs, and her wonderful dark face was crowned by a small fur hat that the Hill had pronounced *très chic*. To him the slight mist that rose from her lips in the cold air seemed to scent her presence.

"You are droll, Jean!" she said. "But I hope madame the *femme* has left the door unlocked for me. . . . Good morning, Jean. And a happy new year, m'sieu!"

Sylvester looked flushed with wine, like Jean, she thought as he replied, yet his eyes were alight with dumb pleading that affected her strangely. But she hid her discomposure behind a quick friendly smile, and, eluding Jean's clutching hands, she mounted to her door.

When the two young men again reached the corner of the Rue Antoinette: "M'sieu," said Jean, "is it not time that we came to an understanding?"

His tone was angry, and Sylvester saw with pleasure that the inevitable quarrel had arrived.

"What does m'sieu mean?" he asked, with exaggerated politeness.

"What are your intentions, may I ask, m'sieu?"

## The Golden Milestone

"My intentions are to go home and sleep!" said Sylvester pleasantly.

"No pleasantries, please!" said Jean angrily. "You know, of course, that I love Yvonne?"

"It is a matter of common knowledge."

Jean flinched. "And since it is so, do you think you are honourable in—in——"

"In loving her myself?" interrupted Sylvester, with sudden distaste. He was approaching Aunt Deborah's opinion, that Frenchmen were "frogs." "But you mistake, m'sieu, if you think that Yvonne cares for you. And I will not have you persecute her with your attentions, let me tell you!"

"I?" echoed the boxer. "I persecute her? . . . And may I ask, m'sieu, by what right do you speak as if you were her protector? How much does she care for *you*?" Sylvester was silent. His big country hands twitched impotently. "But you have not heard what I would say! . . . It is this——!"

"It is unnecessary!" growled Sylvester irritably. "I know you to be a fool, a man who speaks of his love in exchange for the loan of a ten-centime piece, like the gramophones in *L'Audition*! And if you think——!"

"M'sieu!" cried Jean, stepping drunkenly forward, "you insult me! You, naught but a farming pig, dressed up in order to pass yourself off as a Frenchman! But I warn you to be careful, m'sieu!"

Sylvester towered above the hot, flushed face and garrulous, loose-lipped mouth that spat French so fluently; he saw that the pupils of Jean's eyes were black, with a suggestion of brown at the edges, and that the whites had a faint bluish sheen, like thin china.

"You are drunk," he said, pushing the boxer from him. "I can't stay talking all night with a fool! Good night!"

"M'sieu!" cried Jean, clinging. "You pushed me!"

"Oh, loose me before I hit you!" said Sylvester in English, his rage becoming apparent.

"You pushed me, m'sieu!" cried Jean. "And I do not permit——!"

## *New Year's Morning*

Sylvester's impatient hand was flung against the boxer's chest. Jean staggered, and fell drunkenly.

"Wait until you're sober, and we'll discuss things again," said Sylvester. "Good night, m'sieu! Sleep well!"

"Pig!" grunted Jean, endeavouring to stand on the frozen pavement. "But wait, English pig——!"

Sylvester heard no more. He had noticed, as he turned away, that Yvonne had not yet obtained admittance. In alarm he hurried down to her side.

"It is locked. . . . They will not open!" she said in distress. "Oh, what time is it, m'sieu?"

He took out his watch, and with the other hand plied vigorously at the door. "Nearly four," he said briefly. "They are probably sound asleep."

"*Mon Dieu!* Knock again, please, Sylvie!" she said, and then glanced fearfully at his staring face. Inadvertently she had used the old name that had not been on her lips since her refusal of him. He made no comment, but played tattoos upon the door. Then they stood waiting in the snow and the silence of early morning. Seeing that she shivered with cold he knocked again. A taxi hummed across the end of the street, and Yvonne, ignorant of the quarrel, noticed Jean.

"Ah, he is drunk there, see," she said. "He must not be allowed to lie on the ground, or he may die. Please knock again!"

The door remained obdurately closed. There was no sound from the interior. "They do not seem inclined to rise," he said. "Is there nowhere else where you might sleep?"

Insensibly she drew away from his solicitous face. "The hotels that are good are closed. The others——" She shrugged. Suddenly fear seemed to take possession of her, for, stepping forward, she hammered desperately upon the door. "Oh, I *must* get in! It is impossible that they will not come! . . . If only Berthe had been here we should have been home earlier, but I forget the time so easily when I am dancing! Oh, knock again, please!"



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At ten minutes past four they despaired of a reply to their repeated knockings, and turned away.

"There is surely somewhere——?" he began.

"There is Marthe," she said fearfully. "But——"

"You must not go there!" he said, almost angrily. All his heart was on fire to protect her, so friendless and unsheltered she looked, this goddess whose very sighs he treasured in his memory. "Rather come to my room. I have a key."

She turned a dark, resentful face towards him. "Impossible!" she said in a hard little voice. Then, suddenly she began to weep, and the sound unnerved him.

"Yvonne! Yvonne!" he said, his arms starting out for her shoulders. But she retreated from him. "You must not think . . . you must not be foolish! Come, I can sleep on the couch in the room below! Surely you trust *me*, Sylvester?" he ended incredulously.

She nodded miserably, but did not look up. "Yes, it is not that. But it is impossible."

"Come with me. You will be ill, standing here in the cold," he urged, gently taking her arm.

"Marie Geroulle!" she exclaimed.

"*Comment?*"

"Marie Geroulle!" she said hopefully. "I did not think of her! We will try there!"

"Where is it?" he asked, but she heard disappointment in his voice. The idea of having Yvonne under his protection had irresistible charms.

"She lives in the Rue des Martyrs. We will go there. Oh, how you frightened me, Jean!" she exclaimed, as the boxer lurched against her shoulder.

"My home at Grenelle . . . it is waiting for you, Yvonne!" he said thickly, placing a hand on her arm, a hand that Sylvester smote away with feelings of intense satisfaction. "M'sieu?"

"You go too far, m'sieu!" replied Sylvester grimly. "Do not touch Yvonne again!"

"Yvonne," said Jean, turning to her. "You will come with me, will you not?"

## *New Year's Morning*

"There are no trains. And you are drunk," she said. Her glance wavered to Sylvester's dark face.

"We can take a taxi!" said Jean. "Let us go."

Sylvester's great beard protruded threateningly.

"No, I will go with Sylvester," said Yvonne quietly. "We go to awake Marie Geroulle."

They turned away, but Jean, mad with jealousy, stepped forward. "Where do you go?" he said, clutching Yvonne's furs. "You go to his rooms! . . . And if you would give yourself to him, an English pig, why not——?"

But there Sylvester's eager fist interrupted him, and Yvonne gasped as the boxer's heavy body lurched and fell into the snow. She glanced timidly at Sylvester.

"Come, let us go!" he said. "We spend too much time talking to this fool!" And taking her arm he led her away from the cursing boxer.

At the street corner, moved by some hidden impulse, he stopped and whispered: "You *do* trust me, Yvonne?"

She nodded, without looking up, and he felt a momentary tightening of the fingers upon his arm. And a flood of protective tenderness for her shook him.

"I am not afraid, with you, Sylvie," she whispered, lying bravely.

### 2

The Rue Rochechouart was snow covered, its tawdry colours making a poor show in the faint morning light. Behind the closed doors of one café a few late roysterers sang, and drank noisily to the new year. As if in an enchanted world of glittering snow and ghostly lights and black shadows Sylvester trudged on, his great farmer feet clumping in the snow, Yvonne's little gloved hand within his.

The mother of Marie Geroulle leaned buxomly from a window on the third floor of the house in the Rue des Martyrs, and said shortly: "It is impossible. We are full to the very chimneys. Our Cousin Ernest and his *beau père* and all the family sleep within. Even Marie

## The Golden Milestone

herself sleeps elsewhere, with neighbours. There is not room in which a mouse might sleep. I am sorry, *petite*. Cannot m'sieu find you a place somewhere?"

"Yes, madame. We go now, thank you," he replied, and led Yvonne up the Hill. Madame Geroulle smiled wryly upon the backs of the pair, and thought thankfully of the safety of her Marie "with neighbours," before the stinging air caused her to withdraw to her warm bed.

After proceeding some distance in silence: "It is impossible that I come with you, m'sieu!" said Yvonne suddenly in a stifled voice. "It is better that I walk about until morning, or seek shelter in a church or a gendarmerie."

"No, you will come with me," he said firmly. "Have you not said that you trust me, Yvonne? Come, don't be foolish! How could I offend against one—one—" A chivalrous thought, perhaps the first of his life, for her condition stayed the word he would have said. "Trust me, Yvonne, please!"

She sighed, guessing the word he had shirked, and grateful for his forbearance. They proceeded, he on tenterhooks that she might again object, and this time finally.

The Place du Tertre was deserted, but innumerable marks on the snow showed where revellers had crossed and recrossed. The trees dripped, and black circles of wet earth showed about their bases, where the snow had thawed. The dome of Sacré Cœur and the white roofs of the square gave a strange, mediæval-Christmas appearance to the scene. In the air was a smell of hot punch. . . .

Outside his door he fumbled at the lock and opened it, striking a match as he did so. "Come in, Yvonne," he said. "There is yet time for you to sleep off your fatigue."

In the dark café gallery there was neither light nor sound. A glowing skeleton fire, that would crumble at the first touch, was in the grate. He lit the oil-lamp, and turning, saw that her beautiful face showed distress. His heart ached to comfort her.

## New Year's Morning

"Yvonne, you make me ashamed—ashamed of what men are and what I am . . . when you look so!" he said bitterly.

"Ah, do not let me affect you so," she said, trying to speak lightly. "I am very tired."

"Here is your candle," he said. "Go right up the stairs, and the door faces you. I will tell the *femme* to call you at seven, shall I? Let me light your candle for you first." He bustled about her in the cold little room, and she saw, with a queer little tug of affection at her heart, that his big country fingers trembled.

"Thank you, Sylvie," she said. "Good night. Or, rather, good morning!"

"Good night, Yvonne. And—and a happy New Year."

Standing on the first step, she glanced down into his face, as if she would seek a hidden meaning to his wish. He saw that her eyes, so dear and familiar to his dreams, were slightly heavy for lack of sleep. "Thank you, and to you also, Sylvie," she said softly, and left him.

The light played about her slender figure upon the stairs, and shadows swept about the walls. She reached the top, turned and nodded to him, her smiling dark face looking full of mystery in the candlelight, and then, as she closed the bedroom door, the stairs grew dark, and he was alone.

He closed the door, and turned to find the room looking strangely desolate. He crossed to the table and stood there in silence for some time, his great fingers playing aimlessly with his matches. His pulses raced. . . .

Yvonne beneath his roof! Yvonne, his divine girl, up there, sleeping on his pillow!

He flung himself into a chair, and drummed irritably with his fingers upon the table.

"It is well that she is so," he thought in French, for French was beginning to be the vehicle of his thoughts. But his face was full of dissatisfaction, his head flushed with wine and the kindred intoxication of desire; his brow was moist and cold, and from time to time his fingers were twisted in the great black beard that

## *The Golden Milestone*

gave him so foreign a look. Everything was quiet, save for the breathing of Madame Chabbez somewhere above, the dripping of thawed snow outside, and his own heavy breathing and racing pulse. Yvonne! Yvonne!

His eyes sought the door that led to the upper floor, but he forced his glance away. He saw her disrobed, sleeping in his bed, she whom he loved, she who, had the gods been kind, should now have loved him, she, Yvonne, sleeping above there in the silent house.

As if impelled by some force beyond his control, his eyes again sought the door, and he rose and tiptoed across the room. He went furtively, upon his toes, all the passionate gipsy blood in his head, a great yearning for her lips upon him. He opened the door with clumsy fingers, and stood, in wretched irresolution, staring up into the gloom of the stairs. The minutes passed, and riotous thoughts galloped through his brain. If one did not love so much. . . . If one could be as Jean, taking with both hands the gifts that life gave—without scruples. Had it been a Crawford girl above there he would not have hesitated. But Yvonne? If one were a brute, if one could kill loyalty—if she were not so fair and so wonderful. . . .

It seemed as if hours passed.

Then, suddenly, the bell of *Sacré Cœur* pealed out with resonant, silvery tones. He started. And at the second stroke of the bell, as if the power that had impelled him weakened and broke, he closed the door and leaned for a moment, with closed eyes, against it.

Yvonne! Yvonne!

When the bell had ceased sounding, and only the faint murmur of its trembling resonance remained in the frosty air, he returned to his chair, and leaning back in it, stared out wakefully through the window to the grey lights of morning in the clouds. Motionless he remained, as if in a stupor of despair, until sleep came on stealthy feet to close his eyes to the dawning, to open them upon that fairer land where love is always mutual and of the spirit, and where earthly senses weight no wings.

In the dawning light, in his sleep, he looked haggard

## New Year's Morning

and worn, his black hair and monstrous beard accentuating the darkly pallid face until its hue was deathly. And yet fancy might trace there a dawning dignity that the face had lacked before.

He muttered in his sleep, started, and woke with her name upon his lips. Remembrance of the night's adventure returned, and he glanced across at the stair door, upon which the light now palely shimmered. He shuddered, like a man waking from a bad dream. He sighed deeply. Slowly the glance that had rested contemplatively upon the door grew soft and kindly, and full of tenderness for her. His eyes closed, and with a heavy sigh he slept again.

But a faint smile remained upon the red lips that peered out through the soft black hair about his mouth, a smile so strange in its pity and its tenderness that it seemed as if a stranger slept there.

### 3

At his request Madame Chabbez took up breakfast to Yvonne, and afterwards Yvonne parted from him at the door. It was a cold, dark, draughty morning.

"I'm afraid you're still tired, Yvonne," he said. "This *magazin* is a nuisance."

"One must live," she answered lightly, but refusing to notice that he still held her hand. "I don't know how to thank you, Sylvie."

"Please don't try, Yvonne," he said. "I hope you have been comfortable?"

"Yes, thanks. It was too good of you," she said softly. "And you? You have slept in the chair, so? But you ache, I think?"

"No, I slept comfortably, thanks," he said, glancing furtively away.

"Many thanks," she said. "And good morning, Sylvester."

The look in her eyes was new to him, a look not so much of tenderness, but as if, in some way, he had forced

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and subdued her will; there was a meekness about it so foreign to her that it startled him. She seemed to have lost her old independence with her fear of him, as if he had but to lead and she would follow. Moved by an incontrollable tenderness for her, he touched with his lips the fingers he held, and looking up into her face beheld a little smile upon her mouth, a smile that seemed to hint at a welcoming of his love, yet wistfully. She looked, he thought, as if he had given her a beating, and yet as if she no longer feared him. His glance searched her face, so pale in the morning light. She turned from him.

"I shall see you—this evening?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Yes. Come to the Rue Antoinette," she said, as shyly as Marion Briscoe might have spoken. He had never visited her room since her refusal of him. "*Au revoir, Sylvie.*"

"This evening?" he said, and looked for a promise in her eyes.

She nodded, smiling, and left him.

## CHAPTER XII

### CULMINATION

#### I

That first day of the new year had important consequences in the lives of Yvonne Girard and Sylvester Dawe.

As he turned impatient feet towards the Rue Antoinette the streets were astir with afternoon life. It was not so cold as the early morning hours had promised; a wintry sun shone upon the teeming gutters, where persistent yellow slush defied the brushes of the workmen. There was a smell of roasting chestnuts in the air, and the scent of hot punch hung about the entrances of the cafés; taxi wheels tore noisily at the mud; there was a moist, inhospitable look about familiar corners.

He strode on impatiently, looking neither to right nor to left. He wore his neat black lounge suit, a black silk bow, a wide-brimmed black hat, and with his dark face and glossy black beard presented the appearance he intended, of the well-dressed, prosperous bohemian. Yet about him was a suggestion of restlessness and care, as if he trod upon treacherous ground that might open and engulf him. Beneath his assumption of indifference the agony of waiting through the long day had turned his heart to water. His pipes had no comfort for him.

A couple of young Englishmen, belated tourists by their manner and accoutrement, were quarrelling near the corner of the Rue du Faubourg St. Denis, but stilled fretful tongues to stare with reverent looks, Montmartre and Murger plainly visible in their eyes. He smiled behind his beard, grateful for their evident appreciation. Five months ago such homage would have delighted him. Five months? Lots of things can happen in five months.



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He shrugged at the youthful folly of his coming, coming to paint a masterpiece! And then, at thought of Yvonne he sighed and resisted a temptation to tug at his great beard.

The *femme* who opened the door in the Rue Antoinette looked surlily upon him as she told him that both Mad'moiselle Yvonne and her sister were above. He pushed a note into her hand, and walked up to the girls' rooms in the *entresol*.

Yvonne, smiling a shy welcome, admitted him. Her lids were reddened, he noticed. When they were seated she poured out coffee, and pressed him to take cakes and sandwiches. Berthe was absent. His thoughts fled unseizably, in chaotic fashion; the hours that had elapsed since they had parted in the morning seemed to have robbed his visit of its significance.

"Berthe? . . . She is not here?" he asked.

"Ah, yes! She rests in there" (pointing to the bedroom door), "for they attended a party at Suresnes that lasted until breakfast this morning, so that she has not been to her restaurant to-day."

"Madame—*la femme*—she has been angry?" he said, studying her reddened eyes, and speaking resentfully.

She glanced at his face. "Oh, no. She apologizes. I believe she was drunk." Yvonne shrugged. "One might have battered upon the door until midday! . . . It is well that one has friends, m'sieu!" And suddenly tears started to her eyes.

He stared at the sight of madcap, happy Yvonne weeping, and then, unable to restrain himself, he took her in his arms and forced the beautiful, distressed face into the comfort of his shoulder.

"Don't! Don't!" he whispered. "What is it, Yvonne?"

"I am a fool!" she sobbed.

"But what is the matter? . . . No, don't, Yvonne! . . . Yvonne? . . . Tell me what it is?"

She sighed heavily, touching her eyes with a tiny lace handkerchief. "Berthe," she said. "They are getting married."

## Culmination

"And *you*—you are unhappy because of it? You will miss Berthe?"

The bowed head moved in assent, so that the little jade ear-rings swung backwards and forwards. "We have lived together so long. . . . It will be as if death came, I think! . . . They have rented their café-restaurant at Suresnes."

They were silent for a time, and he shivered; the room that, in spite of its draughts, had always been so hospitably cosy, seemed suddenly to grow cold. He could not smile indulgently at her sisterly grief; at the moment it seemed as if the world had never known a parting more poignant, more tragic. He began to murmur incoherent endearments.

After a time she made a little movement to free herself, and he let her go. She sighed, and then smiled ruefully.

"Pardon me, Sylvester. . . . I am a little fool. But when one has lived with one's sister for so long, and loved. . . !" She checked a return to tears.

A gleam came into his eyes. The obvious advantage to his suit of the marriage of Berthe and Anatole reached him at last.

"And you, Yvonne?"

His heart raced in the silence, as she considered his question.

"I? I know not what I do," she said wretchedly.

"There is one thing, Yvonne——!" he began, but she looked up into his face, and he could not proceed.

"You say?" she murmured vaguely.

He suddenly took her, and kissed her, and as his lips rested upon her mouth her tears ran down and touched his cheek, like whispers of unhappiness. "Don't, don't!" he said, in English. Then, in her tongue: "Yvonne, my dear, you know that I love you! You are everything to me, and I can't *live* to see you so unhappy! . . . Yvonne? . . . Oh, my dear, I know that I should not say this, that I should not speak to you of love, that you are not meant for a clumsy farming pig! . . . Yes, Jean was right! . . . But I love you, Yvonne, and I

## The Golden Milestone

would make you happy! If I had to starve to do it! . . . Yvonne? . . . Kiss me! . . . You love me, Yvonne?"

"I think I do," she murmured. And suddenly twisting in his arms, and weeping distressfully, she said: "Oh, kiss me, kiss me, Sylvie! . . . Hold me! Do not let me go!" She clung to him in abandon.

"I love you, *love* you!" he said hoarsely, while his heart sang in triumph. Almost roughly he forced her to look up. "Yvonne?"

She stared at him breathlessly, saying no word, his great hand under her chin.

"Yvonne?" he said again, holding her tightly.

"What is it?" she asked, in a child's querulous murmur.

"I love you!"

She looked up into his dark face, her eyes half closed with emotion. "And I—love you, *chérie*!" she said haltingly, and pressed her lips fiercely to his.

"Ah, mon Dieu!" cried Berthe, from the door. "What is this?"

The lovers smiled shyly upon her.

"We——" began Yvonne.

"Yvonne loves me, and I love Yvonne," he said simply.

Berthe's plump face broke into smiles. "Ah, what happiness!" she said, running across to them. "My felicitations, both of you!" And she took Yvonne in her arms, gazing long into her face before she kissed her. "I am very happy, my dear, if you are happy!"

"And I am happy," said Yvonne, breaking from her sister to fly to Sylvester. "And were it not that you leave me I would be fully happy, my sister."

"Ah, it is *about* a little way, Suresnes," said Berthe, drawing a wrap about her pyjamas and seating herself at the table. "What news! Ah, but we must have much wine to-night! But M'sieu Sylvester, I forgot to thank you for your great kindness to my sister last night. Many thanks, m'sieu. It was *très gentil*!"

"Oh, it was nothing!" he said. "And I have my reward!"

## Culmination

"Ah, you crease my georgette!" cried Yvonne, happily extricating herself.

"Ah, *nom d'un chien*, it is after six o'clock!" cried Berthe, glancing at her wrist-watch. She rose hurriedly. "I must dress, for we meet at the *Trois Petits Porcs* this evening! . . . But—before I go—let me tell you this, M'sieu Sylvester! You have there the sweetest girl in France! It is well that you love her as she deserves, and keep her happiness safe."

"Flatterer!" murmured Yvonne.

"Mad'moiselle Berthe, Yvonne shall be happy, if I must bring down the moon for her sake!" he said, with full heart.

And while Berthe dressed noisily in the next room he drew his arms about the slender body clad in jade green, and pressed kisses upon the curved, crimson lips. They talked of the future, and the happiness it held, and she seemed contented and happy. Sometimes, when he spoke, almost bitterly, of his unworthiness, she kissed him lightly, either in protest or to comfort and reassure him. But she spoke few words.

"Why did you refuse me the first time?" he asked at last.

She smiled happily. "I was afraid of you, I think," she said. "Of your foreignness. Not your Englishness, but the gipsy in your face. You have foreign blood, Sylvester?"

"Are you ready?" cried Berthe, appearing in her black silk cloak and chic bonnet. "Come, there is no time for the sweet exchanges of love at the moment, my children! Make haste, do!"

## 2

"And there is a kitchen as long as a wood-cart!" said Anatole that evening to his guests at his uncle's café, the *Trois Petits Porcs*. "Two big bedrooms and one very little one. A very little one. . . . It is certainly an

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advantage, that little bedroom," he ended, turning languorous eyes upon Berthe.

"It will certainly be useful if you wish to keep poultry," observed Marthe, with a broad grin upon her full lips.

"Poultry?" repeated Anatole vaguely, his long, thin face, with its ludicrous moustache, turned inquiringly towards her.

"You must come and visit us, often, all of you, my children!" said Berthe warmly.

"There will always be a little table set apart for you, Sylvester," said Anatole. "For you and Yvonne, one must say now, of course." Then, turning to Berthe: "How do you like the name 'Sylvester,' *chérie*?"

"'Sylvester'?" queried Berthe, enduring his frequent embraces with her accustomed air of good-natured contentment. "What do you mean?"

"Yes, 'Sylvester.'"

Yvonne suddenly laughed, and Berthe, catching his meaning, chuckled comfortably.

"You are foolish, *mon cher*!" she said, while poor simple Marthe laughed immoderately.

"You think not?" he asked anxiously.

Berthe shrugged, smiling. "It is a good name," she said.

"But surely 'Anatole' would be better?" suggested Sylvester, in whose bright eyes abode quiet happiness. He was not in his element in these gay parties; almost he had grown to dislike French men, and most French women. Only with Yvonne was his spirit, to borrow an expression, *en rapport*; the others were French and seemed, in spite of their apparent frankness, secret and reserved. Yvonne only was familiar, as she was eternal, of all time. . . .

"What do you say, dearest?" Anatole said. "You like 'Anatole,' too?"

"It is very nice," she replied. •

Anatole gazed like a stricken calf into her eyes, and then, turning to Sylvester, said: "Of course, Sylvester,

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it is as she wishes. But if not for the first, we shall certainly use your name, I promise you——"

"For the second!" broke in the irrepressible Marthe.

"Yvonne—she is going to live with you, Berthe?" asked Edouard.

"She will not," said Berthe unhappily.

"Yvonne, you do not doubt my—our hospitality, do you?" asked Anatole earnestly. ("Pass my glass along, please.")

"No, Anatole," said Yvonne. "But I have to be near my work, and I could not journey backwards and forwards each day between Suresnes and Paris. And besides, it is not well to spoil your honeymoon, Anatole, by inviting a third!"

"And it would take her away from Sylvester, too!" said Marthe, with malicious good-humour.

But here Jean, who had sat, unnoticed, alone in an alcove, suddenly appeared at the side of the table. His square, southern face was bloated. He was drunk, they saw.

"Good evening, Yvonne!" he said, in a loud voice, a cynical light in his eyes. Glances were turned from all parts of the café.

"Good evening," she said.

He leaned, swaying slightly, against the table, so that Marthe grabbed her glass of chablis with anxious hands. "I hope mad'moiselle had a happy night?"

"Yes, thanks," said Yvonne, and then, suddenly suspecting his intention, but hardly crediting her suspicion, she gazed up in alarm at his face.

He laughed immoderately, but without mirth.

"And m'sieu, he is a happy man?" he said, with bitter humour.

A titter ran round the café tables. Sylvester rose. There could be no mistaking the inference now.

"M'sieu!" he began, the hot gipsy blood in his face. "This lady has promised to marry me. So that in referring to her, will you consider her as my affianced wife?"

The sturdy little boxer went pale as death. He looked

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from Sylvester to the pale face of Yvonne. "It is true?" he asked huskily of her.

She nodded, without looking up.

For a moment Jean stared his despair into Sylvester's face. Then his lips curled in an ugly sneer. "It is, no doubt, a precautionary measure that is necessary, m'sieu?" he said with a mock courtesy.

Sylvester's two great hands clutched at his neck, and the boxer was shaken until his teeth rattled and his eyes started from his head. Everybody was standing by this time.

"*Mon Dieu!*" murmured Yvonne in affright.

"There!" said Sylvester, casting him, with a frenzied heave, across the gangway so that he fell crashing into a table. "That will give you a taste of what you will receive if you speak again of Yvonne in that way."

Here Monsieur Parrett, Anatole's uncle, hastened to the scene, and receiving a word from his nephew, called his assistants, who first requested and finally forced Jean to rise. Struggling madly, with tears of rage in his eyes, he was borne past the table where Yvonne sat, but by a superhuman effort he escaped the clutching hands of the waiters, and ran back. Sylvester rose threateningly.

Jean halted before Yvonne. Then he took her hand, and leaning his head upon the back of her chair he began to weep, and not as drunken men are used to weep.

Yvonne motioned off the waiters and the fuming Englishman, who could not understand Jean's passionate despair. The café loungers turned back to their glasses in shamefaced fashion, to avoid the uncomfortable sight.

When Jean grew calmer Yvonne and Anatole pressed him to sit down and forget his sorrow.

"No, mad'moiselle," he said in a low voice. "It is not for me, who have offended you so. Pardon me." And pressing her hand he hurried out of the café.

When they had resumed their seats Yvonne wiped her eyes, and Sylvester endeavoured to hearten her with his clumsy endearments.

"I hope he does nothing rash," she said.

"Ah, no, think not of him," said Berthe bluffly.

## Culmination

"Anatole, more wine! Sylvester, another glass! Forget it. He is unworthy of thought."

"When he knew that Yvonne was going to marry Sylvester he lost heart," said Marthe sagaciously.

"You will be almost a *beau-frère*," said Anatole. "Decidedly, your name shall be used! 'Anatole' first, certainly, but 'Sylvester' second! Yes! Even, they might be used together!"

Berthe pretended to tug viciously at his small moustache.

"But, Anatole, suppose they're girls?" said Marthe gleefully.

Anatole started, as if a chasm had opened at his feet. His spirits visibly evaporated. Turning anxiously to Berthe: "Should you like it so? You would like girls?" he asked.

"Yes, Anatole," said Berthe softly, her glance resting musingly upon Yvonne's face.

Anatole sighed deeply, and meekly relinquished his dream.

### 3

But Anatole Theobald Parrett and Jacqueline Berthe Girard were not joined in lawful wedlock until the cold spring weather had gone and an April sun shone upon the city. For the café-restaurant at Suresnes collapsed in a night, kitchen as long as a wood-cart, two big bedrooms, little bedroom that was to be so useful, and all, and it was only after long and trying negotiations that poor Anatole escaped with his savings intact. The wedding was abandoned until another love-nest should be discovered. Anatole found many, but none suited his taste, his keen business instinct, and the limitations of his purse together.

So the months passed, the snow and the rain disappeared, and the brave pageant of Parisian summer began. Yvonne and Sylvester entered into a round of gaiety that turned the spring into a season of joyous holiday-making. And gradually, imperceptibly to herself,



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his solicitude for her happiness, his humility, that fitted him like a strange, hastily cut garment, and his constant adoration wore down the remaining prejudices she had felt, and stilled for ever her fear of him. Slowly her old air of gaiety returned until she was once more the happy, careless, laughing daughter of the Hill that she had been before. Sometimes she talked to him of England, of London and Birmingham (which was all the geography she remembered), and soon betook herself to a study of his strange tongue, beginning first with laughing mockery of his forgetful exclamations in English, and progressing until she possessed many little words and phrases. And her love deepened until their hearts were matched, and happiness came to them in full measure.

It is certainly true that these four months were the happiest of Sylvester's life. Since Yvonne had given herself to him it seemed as if something wonderful had happened to him, and as if some radical change had come over the world. He loved, and was loved, and his heart yearned ever for night and Yvonne and romance. When they were alone together he tired not of tracing the beautiful lines of her mouth and neck, of touching with his lips her pale eyelids, like lily pads on sunny ponds, or of wondering at the soft lights upon her hair and the slender mystery of her young body. Her face was known to him like a dear, familiar country; the slightly curved, beautiful nose, the oval cheeks and curved, crimson lips, the dark eyes where mystery ever seemed to abide, the little ears carrying their tiny rings, and the chocolate brown hair, like a crown to glorify the beautiful pallor of her face. These moments with her, when their lips clung and pulses rioted, were for him the very apices of life, moments that could not be contrived and planned, that bred themselves in secret, in casual words and hand-touches, until suddenly the moment flowered and they two thrilled with the poignant, exquisite delight of mutual possession. Their words were foolish, of course, but only to the fool, the dweller without the gate; love has no need of words. They dwelt in a separate heaven, and swam in an emotional mist that obscured the pressing

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world, and softened the loved face held so near until beauty stood out naked to shake the heart, and in shy glimpses features became impressed upon the memory for all time. A great yearning to possess her and to guard her against the world took him at such times; some part of his brain that was not sensual responded to her gracious concessions, so that he planned for her, and thought for her, and joyfully would have died for her; even would he have taken harsh words from her, and ill-treatment of his love, and yet kept his love to the end. Once he thought of old Gaffer Greatoreux of Crawford, a man who was so badly henpecked by his young wife that he was a byword in the village, and the villagers said that he was a fool to walk so meekly at the stinging persuasion of his wife's tongue. Maybe, Sylvester thought, with a momentary insight into mysteries, maybe people were wrong. He, Sylvester, would take Yvonne's anger, her ill-treatment, her scorn of his love, and yet remain meek and kiss the rod. Perhaps, he thought (with more truth than he imagined), this curious attitude had something to do with the parson's talk of love returning good for evil. Whatever the explanation, he knew that it was true of his love for Yvonne.

And always, when he went from her presence, he carried the magic touch of her love. In his youth he had had an eye for beauty, but his heart had not been melted, as it was in these days, by the beauty that is in the world. Hitherto it was the masculine beauty that had appealed to him, the beauty of strength and brazen colouring. But now the feminine beauties and the feminine pleasures appealed to his heart. He began to feel pleasure in the cleanliness of his hands and nails, the soft feel of Yvonne's sleeve upon his cheek, the intoxicating touch of flower petals upon his lips, the shape and colour and "feel" of his clothes, the luxury of physical indolence, the sleek beauty of his shoulders seen naked in the glass, the mystery of faint scents that persisted, the whispering response of his black hair to his touch. And, of course, Yvonne was the centre of his world of beauty; once, lifting her arm to touch his face,

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the open sleeve of her gown fell down about her shoulder, and the beauty of her upper arm, the svelte curves of the shoulder, and the quaint outward bend of the forearm from the elbow, were an amazing revelation to him. She was beauty incarnate, the source of all delight, God's ambassador upon earth carrying about with her glimpses of the beauty of life after life. And one had to be worthy of her, however unworthy one might feel. The dignity that had been born in the first hours of the new year strengthened and deepened in his face, and humility came, and sympathy, the quality that he lacked. These qualities were of slow growth, yet already he could see the difference between his attitude to Yvonne and his attitudes to his Staffordshire loves; at home he had taken, without insight into deep emotion, drinking selfishly at the easily won chalice, careless of the happiness of she who proffered it. But with Yvonne his thought was ever for her happiness, his heart always straining eagerly to fly upon her errands. And he was happy so. The world seemed suddenly bent upon holiday-making, and the conventions of the workaday life had gone. He desired to walk in the night, and take promiscuous but carefully chosen meals; he smoked less and drank less, and was delightfully conscious of himself and of his love. He trod the streets where she would pass with the patience of a hound; certain physical objects, previously commonplace, took on a magic allurements because of some real or fancied association with her, and rooms and places where they had kissed became for ever fairy-haunted and golden-hued, as if soft sighs and whispered endearments and passionate silences lingered there intangibly. . . .

Love had found Sylvester Dawe. And it would be foolish to laugh at him. For long ago there was an ass that walked upon palms, and Love had come to him and pressed him to her service. Yet none was there to laugh at him, in spite of his wooden head and frail, staggering legs. For he was a servant of Love, and was so ennobled.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE PARTING

#### I

AND then, breaking in upon the Elysian spring and their joyous happiness, Anatole brought news that he had found his love-nest.

It was in the middle of April, and Sylvester and Yvonne and Berthe and Edouard were sitting in a boxing booth in Montparnasse. Jean had extracted a promise from Yvonne to come and see him battle for the middle-weight prize in a tournament, and it was during the first rounds that Anatole found them. Jean's face was white and resolute.

"*Victoire, Jean!*" shrilled Anatole, becoming excited and forgetting his news. "*Jean, victoire!*"

Berthe turned, wonderingly, to greet him, but his eyes were turned towards the ring. Yvonne fluttered a handkerchief, and Jean glanced a response. Silence fell upon the booth, and suddenly, in the tightly drawn silence, Anton, Jean's opponent, clinched, broke away, and in breaking away broke down Jean's guard, and the next moment Jean fell backward from a vicious jab. The gong saved him. Anatole whispered in the ear of Berthe. She said: "Brive?" He whispered again, and then the sixth and deciding bout was announced by a sonorous clang of the bell.

The opponents rushed to meet one another, and there was mixed fighting for a moment, until Jean drove his man back to the ropes, and there lashed in blow after blow, but could not reach a dangerous spot. Then this Jules Anton fought his way out of the tight corner, and in attempting to follow him up Jean tripped slightly, recovered, and received a knock-out blow upon the point of

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the jaw. And then, amid a rising uproar of voices, the referee's voice intoned: "*Un . . . deux . . . trois . . . quatre . . .*" Jean stirred, and again became immobile, lying upon his side. "*Sept . . . huit . . . neuf . . . DIX!*" There was a roar of cheering. . . .

When Jean was seated in his chair and gave signs of recovery Yvonne waved to him. He waved back, and shrugged, dejectedly. Yvonne sighed for him.

"He is a brave little one, that Jean," she murmured wistfully to Sylvester. Then, catching words from Anatole's gabbling, she looked round. "What did you say? You have the restaurant? You have rented it?" she asked quickly.

Anatole explained, while the rest stared into his face. "It is very little, but in a good street, and I think it will do good business," he said.

"Where did you say?" asked Yvonne.

"Brive, Correze," he replied.

"Our birthplace," said Berthe quietly. "I think we had better go now."

### 2

Sylvester and Yvonne sat in the little room in the Rue Antoinette that evening. Berthe and Anatole had gone to arrange for the wedding.

"It is a long way," said Yvonne musingly. "I do not remember much about Brive, but what I do remember is pleasant. I wonder whether you will like it?"

"I? Whether I would like it? I don't know, but I shan't have an opportunity of finding out," he said. "It comes at the right moment, this news, for my money is nearly gone. If it hadn't been for the rate of exchange I couldn't have stayed as long as I have. As it is, I shall have just enough to take us back."

He had not noticed that she sat listening in a frozen silence. Now she stared at him, and said: "You mean, that you must return to England?"

"Yes, of course. I've been here on holiday."

## *The Parting*

"But. . . . You mean that you cannot come to Brive?"

He saw that she was pale, and that there was fear in her eyes. "No, of course I can't, Yvonne," he said. "I must go back to England to work."

"To Abb—— to this village where your relatives live?"

"Yes. We had better get married at the same time as Anatole and Berthe. Would that be convenient?"

She rose from his arms. "Ah, no!" she said, and her tone startled him. "You mean, definitely, that you cannot come to Brive, that you wish for me to come with you to England?"

"Of course! You knew that we should have to go back soon, didn't you?"

"I did not! You have not told me! . . . Oh, I could not! . . . I thought, when we were married, we should live here."

"But my money's all gone, Yvonne, and I must work."

"But you could work in Brive?"

"No. I'm not fit for work here. I *know* the work in England."

She looked troubled, but did not answer for some time. "But——?" she began, like one whose world suddenly dissolves.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously. "You will come with me?"

"Ah, no!"

He rose to his feet, his face growing grey. "You mean that you cannot come? . . . But Yvonne, why not? You love me, don't you?"

"But, yes! . . . But you know not what you ask, Sylvester!" She paced restlessly across the room. "To leave France and Berthe and all my friends, to go to England, to live in a little village! . . . Ah, no, do not ask it of me, for I must refuse! . . . Surely there is some work you might do in France?"

"There is nothing," he said. "What, do you love France, then, better than you love me?"

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"Ah, no!" She crossed to him and flung herself into his arms, pressing her troubled, beautiful face to his. "Ah, Sylvester, it is not that I would hurt you, pain you! I love you! I belong to you wholly! But do you not see that Paris is my home, that France . . . ah, I could not leave France! If I go to Brive I, too, must find work, and if I stay in Paris, with Berthe gone, I shall have more need of the dear city and of my friends here, who have been sisters and brothers to me! Do you not see that I could not be happy away from France?"

He could not understand, for his progress had been slow. He only knew that there was a bitter pain at his heart. He took her hands from about his neck, and said bitterly: "You do not love me, or you would not let these things weigh with you. Paris or Brive or England, what does it matter so long as we are together?"

"I could not leave France!" she wailed.

"Then you do not love me! What, have you given your love again to Jean?"

She struggled to embrace him, the tears starting to her eyes. "Oh, Sylvester, Sylvester, do not speak so!" she cried. "I love you, and you only! I love you! I would work for you, die for you, my dear——!"

"But you would not live in England for me!" he interrupted bitterly.

She turned from him, her shoulders heaving. And for some time they were silent, save for the sound of her heart-broken weeping. He stood irresolute, his thoughts in a whirl, a great grief at his heart.

Suddenly he strode over to the bent figure, and seizing her in his arms, crushed her fiercely to him, seeking her lips. "I love you! I love you!" he said brokenly. "And I can't let you go! . . . I *must* return to England—I am fit for no work here, and my money is all gone! Don't spoil everything, my happiness and your own, just for a prejudice! Yvonne, come back to England with me, marry me, and then if you find that you cannot live in England I'll bring you back! . . . It would be like a holiday, and you can make it as short as you like! . . . Yvonne!"

## The Parting

"Ah no!"

"You don't love me! . . . I shall have to go back alone, then!"

"Sylvester, you must not say that! . . . Oh, we cannot be parted! . . . Oh, I wish that I did not love you!" she ended bitterly.

He kissed her hair, his face working. There had been no anticipation of the difficulty. She knew that he had come to Paris to paint, that his home was in England, but he had seemed rich in his spending, one who had money enough to live anywhere.

"Come, Yvonne, which is it to be, France or your lover?" he said.

"You mean to go?"

"I *have* to go!" he replied almost angrily. "Why, it is but a little time you need stay, if you wished to return to France! . . . For the fête in July, for example!"

"In July?"

"Yes, if you wished to return."

She sighed deeply, unhappily, but said nothing. He saw that her fingers trembled, that the little pulse in her temple beat distressfully.

"Yvonne?" he whispered. "You will come with me?"

She moistened dry lips, and moved her head in wretched indecision. He pressed his lips to hers in a long kiss. "You will come, Yvonne?" he urged.

"If—you wish me to," she said sadly. And then, with her sudden smile, a smile that for once had little mirth, however, she said: "I could not let you go, you know, *chérie*! I should be like poor Anatole with—" (a sob banished the smile) "without his Berthe! . . . Oh, Sylvester, Sylvester, you will surely bring me back? You will not forget? You will bring me back, *chérie*?" she urged desperately, her lips working in painful fashion.

He kissed her, and promised, and talked and talked, of Abbott's Crawford and the beauty of its flowers and trees, of their happiness to be, and of their return to Paris.

She listened, forcing herself to smile at his brave



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front, and at the picture of happiness he painted for her, forcing herself, at last, even to speak with apparent pleasure at the prospect. And so the crisis was passed; and her promise given.

But from that day until they were married a fortnight later he found that the happy, careless Yvonne of the Hill, the Yvonne he had loved so much, had changed, seeming to lose her girlhood and her irresponsibility. She reminded him strangely of the Yvonne who had parted from him at his door in the Place du Tertre upon that memorable first morning of the new year.

He decided that she grieved, chiefly, at the prospect of parting from Berthe.

### 3

The civil wedding took place on April the twentieth, and after the wedding dinner at the *Trois Petits Porcs* Berthe and her husband parted with tears from Yvonne and Sylvester and their friends at the Gare d'Orleans, and the train sped southwards. It seemed to Yvonne to carry her heart away. . . .

At about half-past nine Sylvester and Yvonne escaped from the reminiscences of Monsieur Parrett, the tears of madame his wife, the set white face of Jean, and the felicitations of friends, and climbed the Hill to get Sylvester's luggage. They were to catch the early morning boat from Dieppe.

There was the usual crowd supping in the Place du Tertre, to the clatter of plates and the chatter of tongues and the sound of indiscriminate music, and candlelight lit the scene. Yvonne was still subdued after her tearful parting with Berthe, but she smiled tenderly at his endearments, not trusting herself to speak more than monosyllables.

"This was the place I came to first," he said. "What a raw countryman I was then! And a painter, too! Lord, what a fool I was, Yvonne! And what an age it seems, too. . . . It was here that I first met you."

## *The Parting*

"No, in the Rue Rochechouart," she said quietly.

"Yes, but it was here that I first—I first knew that you were so beautiful, that you were the most beautiful girl in the world! . . . I shall never forget that night!"

"They will be half-way now, I should think," said Yvonne, almost to herself.

"M'sieu desires?" said a waiter at their elbow.

"I am not hungry," said Yvonne.

"A bottle of Burgundy, then," said Sylvester. "I think the funds will run to it."

"None for me, Sylvester," she said.

When the wine was brought he pressed her to drink, but tears choked her, and she wept in his arms in the half-darkness of the square. He murmured endearments to her until, declaring she was a fool, she roused herself from the grief that possessed her and drank, though tearfully, a glass of the red wine.

"A demi-bottle of white wine," he demanded of the waiter next. "We will take it with us. It may be cold on the boat, and a glass of wine will cheer you up."

She shivered.

Their heaviest luggage was packed, and had been sent on to Dieppe. They rose, having nothing to do before the train went at eleven o'clock, and he took her to the broken ground before the church of Sacré Cœur, that they might there bid adieu to Paris. There was little to be seen. The whole world, beneath a new moon, seemed studded with flame-coloured lights of every size, and in between lay black shadows or a roof bathed in reflected light. A great hum came up to them, and the whisper of violins and the monotonous thump of a jazz band, and the murmuring of a light-hearted multitude. A little wind fanned their faces, moving the hair of his great beard and carrying away the smoke from his cherry-wood pipe, which, for some reason, he now began to smoke again in preference to the French ones he had bought. And there was an acrid smell of incense in the air.

And as they stood in silence, the big grim young man and his slender, beautiful bride, his thoughts travelled

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to that day of his coming, to his painting experiences, to the coming of Yvonne and the happy days of their love. And he realized, with heartfelt gratitude, that his coming had not been fruitless; that what might have been the fiasco of a lifetime had brought him happiness undeserved, such happiness that comes to some men but once, and to most never.

He turned away, green fields and pleasant lanes in his eyes. She stood, as if she had forgotten his presence, her eyes gazing dreamily upon the city, and beyond it to the dusky southern horizon. And he could not see the pain in her face, nor guess at her thoughts.

"Come, darling," he said. "I'll get a taxi and we'll call for your bag. You are ready?"

"Yes," she said. Turning, she clutched his shoulders. "Oh, Sylvie, if you love me you will bring me back, will you not? It is not for long, this parting? We shall come back to meet Berthe and Anatole at July, as we have arranged? We shall return?"

"Yes, of course," he said.

"And we will all meet, Marthe and poor Jean and Edouard and all of them, and have a gay time, as we have done? You will not forget?"

"No, of course not, *chérie!* We shall return. It is only for a little while. . . . But come, Yvonne. It is time we went."

She took his arm, and sighing heavily, turned her back upon the beloved city.

## CHAPTER XIV

### CROWMARSH

#### I

"WE arrive!" he whispered happily, as they settled down in the gig that Willum George, the farm's "boy," had brought to the station to meet them. The big brown mare shook her head and harness, and settled down to a steady trot. "In half an hour we shall be home, Yvonne!"

She saw the pleasure in his face. "And I shall be happy so," she said. "For it is truly a long way." She had slept lightly in the train, but now, refreshed and bright as a newly-wakened child, her eyes and ears, and, in some curious fashion, her very body seemed busily apprehending the new land. "But it is charming, this England, Sylvie! Truly they lied about it. And here you will paint again, of course?"

He grimaced at the old ghost. "Paint? . . . I don't think so. But it is true, there is enough colour to supply all the artists of the Hill."

"But the Hill, it is absent, that is all," she mused wistfully. Then, remembering her resolution to make the best of things: "Ah, the dear little roads!"

Willum George, the plump boy, sat in the gig's rear seat and listened in awed silence to the foreign sounds. He sat half-turned, so that covertly he might detect Yvonne in the act of eating frogs.

The trains had been slow, and a tardy dusk held the countryside. It was at that season of the year—the end of April—when suddenly, as it were in a night, the world was green again, and the days of black and white and grey had gone, so that the golden days might come. Green was the grass beside the road, and the hedges were stippled with a wonderful green, broken here and there

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by blackthorn blossom like April's may, and one caught glimpses of primroses and cowslips upon favoured banks, and beneath the hedges the lesser celandine, like a shiny hedge buttercup. In the trees the woodpecker tapped continually for his dinner, and in one field rabbits played within a hundred yards of seven frisky lambs that went galloping off up the field at the sound of the oncoming gig. The warm sun from the west was reflected in the wet surfaces of the road and the tree-trunks, so that the world was a fairyland of gold and green, a fairyland from which the hag winter had been expelled. A fresh afternoon breeze touched their faces, and Yvonne smelt the pines and stiffened in ecstasy at the new, strange scent.

At the top of the last hill Sylvester pointed forward to the dusky hollow. "Abbott's Crawford!" he said.

She stared moodily upon the line of little roofs and the rusty little spire, over which the shadow of the east was creeping, as she had stared at Newhaven from the boat. Here, then, was his home, that was to be her home for a short time. This was the heart of the great northern land. She looked round upon the darkening fields, and apprehension was in her glance.

"It is very little," she murmured.

"It is certainly not Paris!" he said clumsily, and chuckled at his countryman's wit.

She did not smile.

There were more folks than usual scattered about the tiny street, and each shyly nodded to Sylvester, staring covertly the while to see if his French wife looked "fast," and if she was properly clothed. Their anticipatory mental images vacillated between a short-skirted, red-bonneted, cockaded and sabotaged virago, and a brazen hussy of the American film "vamp" type. Instead, they saw her slender and apparently shy, olive-skinned and beautiful in the dusk. And behind the gig groups formed for an hour-long discussion of her and of the marriage. Old Mobberly, the village's chief masculine gossip, seized his moleskin cap and his stick, and, bearing a rich burden of gossip, started off up the street to pay a round of visits.

## Crowmarsh

"Tell me, why did they stare so?" asked Yvonne with a smile, as they sped down Lovers' Lane.

"I think they expected you to be a black woman, Yvonne! French wives are few in this quarter. . . . This is called the little road of the lovers, *chérie*."

"Veree pretty!" she said in English. And in her own tongue: "And true, is it not?" she whispered softly.

He looked into her face, and thought he saw apprehension. Ignorant of the flutter at the heart of poor Willum George he kissed her, and was so seen by Sally Twitten, whose stiff neck and glassy eye attested her amazement.

Over the bridge they hummed, and soon looked down upon the dark hamlet. A light shone from the kitchen window of the farm.

"Home!" he cried.

"*Comment?*"

"*Chez moi* . . . and your home, too, Yvonne!"

She touched his hand with her lips. "I am very glad to arrive, my husband," she said. "For I am very fatigued. It is so far, is it not?" A sigh quivered in her throat. "Your family, they are—they are pleasant, the Farmer John and Granny Mary, yes?"

"Soon you will see!" he cried.

Willum George leaped down and opened the gate. And out from the house bustled Granny Mary, her sweet old face working with happy tears, and behind her came Belle and Farmer John and Young Jack and Aunt Deborah, while Gladys May peered furtively round the corner of the blind. But Gaffer John remained beside the fire, gasping and wondering at their sudden exit, and fearing fire in the ricks, his constant dread.

## 2

"We've been expecting you all day!" cried Belle, as he descended.

He greeted them, and they all exclaimed at sight of

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his great beard. "Why, I 'ardly knowed y'!" said Granny joyfully.

"And this is Yvonne!" he said, helping her down from the gig. They heard pride in his voice.

For a moment, before they surrounded her with welcoming hands and mouths, she and they faced each other, she so utterly French, they so utterly English. They saw her, dark, slender, beautiful, and above all, to their minds, that had anticipated her coming, indubitably *foreign*. Her eager glance ranged from the pleasant soft smile of Berthe to Farmer John's eyes gleaming with hospitality, to the sweet familiarity of Granny Mary's face, to Young Jack's honest, welcoming eyes, and to the little friendly smile that struggled through the grim line of Aunt Deborah's mouth, like an angel squeezing through the bars of hell. Her glance rested for a moment on Aunt Deborah's face; then their hands were shyly upon her, and their mouths offered welcoming words and kisses.

Standing amongst them, with Belle's arm about her: "You make me happy——" she began in French, but stopped at sight of Aunt Deborah's gape, and glanced appealingly to Sylvester.

"What's come to the girl?" asked Aunt Deborah in a mystified tone.

"She speaks no English, of course," said Sylvester.

But Belle's practical common sense evaded the embarrassment. "Of course she doesn't!" she said. And turning to Yvonne: "But she understands that we are glad to see her, don't you, Yvonne?" she said, kissing the wondering girl, who at once smiled and nodded affirmatively, returning the kiss.

"That's right, my lass!" cried Farmer John, taking Yvonne's free arm. "Now come along in an' get some-thin' to eat." And Yvonne, still vague about the various relationships, but heartened by their warm country welcome, went off to the house between Belle and Farmer John. Granny Mary followed on Sylvester's arm, and he was touched by her broken words of happiness. Young Jack called Sammy Stewart, a little wisp of a man who

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helped on the farm, to come and help bring up the luggage, and when he had come Aunt Deborah stayed to instruct the farm hand and the boy about the bestowal of the luggage. She rated the pair for their clumsiness, and decided that that little Willum George was sullen.

In the kitchen the oil-lamp was lit, and a blazing wood-fire crackled in the grate, throwing shadows and red reflections upon the walls. Gaffer John smoked on stubbornly.

"And this is Gaffer John!" said Belle, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Gaffer! This is Yvonne!" Gaffer took no heed. "Gaffer!"

"Gaffer Johnny, this is Yvonne, Sylvie's wife!" cried Granny Mary.

He looked up, rolling cumbrous eyeballs. Then he rounded one immense ear with his hand.

"This is Yvonne, gaffer!" cried the old lady, growing red with exertion. "Oh, dear, did y' ever see such a contrary old man! . . . Shake 'ands, Gaffer! D'y' 'ear?"

The eyes came round again, and rested upon the face of Yvonne, who inbreathed shudderingly beneath the weight of their cowlike stare. The pipe was slowly removed from the moist mouth. "Yes I do," he said querulously.

"Then shake 'ands properly!"

"Eh?"

"Shake 'ands properly!"

Yvonne, almost in tears, bent and kissed the forehead of the old man, closing her eyes as she did so. . . .

And the pipe dropped from his lips, and in a ponderous silence he stared upon Yvonne. Then his great face crumpled and creased with merriment, and: "Haw! Haw! Haw! Did ye ever!" he gasped, and in trying to smite his knee missed it and nearly overbalanced. The strain relieved, Yvonne laughed too, and finding him less monstrous, kissed him again. He gasped at alarming length, and then said: "Mae owd 'ooman'd better be alewkin' after mae! Haw! Haw!" It was the first time he had laughed since, seven years ago, he



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had bribed a new "hand" to fetch him a half-gallon of ale, and had been hopelessly drunk after the debauch.

"Tea's the word!" said Belle vigorously. "Is that kettle boiled, Gladys May?"

"First Yvonne will want to wash and change," said Granny wisely, taking the girl's hand. "Come with me, my dear."

And so Yvonne was received into the family. Granny Mary took her up to her room, that had been Sylvester's room last year. The new-comer was torn between tears and smiles until, alone with Granny Mary in the plain, sweetly scented country bedroom, tears won, and Granny Mary abandoned the fine French shoes she was untying to murmur and croon and stroke the beautiful dark head. And although she was ignorant of the meaning of the little tender words, Yvonne felt to the full their comfort, and thanked with kisses the little apple-cheeked old lady.

"You feel it . . . leavin' y' mammy an' comin' away . . . so far . . . to meet strangers. Oh, I know! . . . Why, when I was eight I 'ad to go to Uttoxley to stop wi' my Aunt Louisa, darlin', an' I felt just the same. . . . Could ha' cried me eyes out, I could. . . . But you'm in good 'ands, little girl! Dry your eyes. Granny will take care of you. . . . That's right. . . . Now I must take off these pretty shoes—my, 'ow fine you are!—an' y' must 'ave a wash an' change, an' you'll feel much better then. . . ."

Yvonne stroked the old head, and the hair drawn so neatly down and bobbed into a "bun" behind, beneath a tiny white lace cap pinned almost coquettishly on. And she sighed with relief. The dreaded moment of her coming was passed.

### 3

After the tea things had been borne from the great table, and the lamp newly trimmed, the family gathered about the fire to examine the presents he had brought and to question him about his Parisian venture. He said

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little about painting, and nothing about the state of his finances. Yvonne listened in amazement at their English, but she was not cast down, for many little kindnesses had been done for her comfort since her arrival, so that even Gaffer John's occasional scrutiny had lost its terrors. She had found tea a curious meal: boiled eggs and apple tart and elderberry jam had been served, with bread and butter and strong tea. The novelty of the dishes had interested her, but her tongue had been gratified by one thing only, the new *confiture*. But the strong tea? . . . She shuddered at the memory.

"And how about your pictures?" asked Belle, at last.

He stared for a moment. "Oh, I didn't do very well. I chucked it, to tell you the truth, Belle. I wasn't any good at it, I found."

"Didn't I always say so?" asked Aunt Deborah.

"An' what's the next move, my lad?" asked Farmer John.

"Why, of course, he'll come and help me with the duck-farm, eh, Sylvie?" said Young Jack, with pleasure in his face.

"Yes, of course. How's it going?"

"It's a success!" cried Belle.

"Not exactly a success yet," said Jack. "But it looks promising. And with your help, and Johnny Waters——"

"It was Johnny who thought about it, Sylvie!" said Belle.

"Yes, you told me in your letter. Yes, we'll get to work, Jack."

"It was jolly decent of you, sending that fifty pounds, Sylvie!" said Young Jack gratefully. "If it hadn't been for that I couldn't have started it."

Sylvester looked down at his thumbs. They did not know how near he had been to retaining the fifty pounds. Neither did they know that the dark, beautiful girl who sat listening was the unconscious instigator of the sending of the money, and the sending of letters and the bringing of presents to-day. "You know, Jack, I don't think I played quite straight about that money I had. It ought to have been share and share alike. It's rather selfish of

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me to come into this duck-farm stunt now that it is likely to be a success."

They stared at him. It was a new Sylvester who spoke from behind that great beard and moustache.

"Oh, no, that isn't the case at all!" said Young Jack. "It was your money that started it, and I think we shall make a good thing of it."

"But dunna y' see 'ow much better it would ha' bin if y'd kept that 'undred to 'elp things along?" said Aunt Deborah. "I dunna suppose y' 'ave much on it left?"

"No," he said, rather glumly.

She made a little sound expressing disappointment. "It's a pity," she said grimly, and glanced at the glass bangles on Yvonne's beautiful arms, and the ear-rings in her ears.

But Belle and Farmer John broke in with encouraging words. Sylvester would do well. His help was badly needed. He had been missed. . . .

Yvonne said: "Give me a cigarette, please," and they all remained silent, listening curiously to the foreign sounds.

"I think they are in my overcoat," he said evasively. "Do you really want one?"

"Yes, please. Bring, also, the white wine, that Farmer John may drink," she said.

He rose, suddenly seeing difficulties ahead; the sight alarmed him. Luckily the people at the farm did not know French, he decided. "Farmer John does not drink, at least in the louse, Yvonne," he said, while Farmer John stared from one to the other, hearing his name but not understanding.

"No? Then do not bring it, my dear. But I wish for a cigarette very much," said Yvonne.

He pretended to go upstairs for his coat, and returned with his cigarette-case in his hand. He did not look at Aunt Deborah as Yvonne selected a cigarette and lit it, curling her crimson lips about its stem. But Aunt Deborah stared, and then looked away uncomfortably.

There was an awkward silence, while Yvonne innocently blew smoke to the ceiling, her only thought being

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to avoid the stare of Gaffer John. Then, catching Belle's eye, she seized his case and offered a cigarette with a friendly smile.

"No, thanks," said poor Belle, blushing.

Aunt Deborah glanced darkly at Granny Mary.

"You *fumez*—not smoke?" said Yvonne, essaying English.

"No, thank you," said Belle.

And silence came again, while Sylvester's heart beat anxiously. Farmer John stared fixedly at the clock on the mantelpiece; here was a tale to tell at the Goat's Head, if you like!

And in the silence a piercing whistle sounded from the road.

"What's that?" asked Aunt Deborah.

"I—I've heard it before," said poor Belle faintly.

"'Tis Johnny Waters, isn't it?" said Granny Mary, smiling encouragingly to her granddaughter.

"Yes," said Belle, rising.

Sylvester, smiling in mock surprise, caught her glance, and exclaimed: "What, our Belle and Johnny Waters?"

"Followin' in your footsteps, Sylvie!" cried Farmer John. Aunt Deborah looked sombrely down her big nose. "But, lass," he called after his daughter, who was leaving by the kitchen door, "why not bring 'im in? Ae'll come in sooner or later, I reckon!"

Every eye was turned upon Belle, for this was a new departure. Belle noticed that her mother frowned and looked away. She hesitated.

"Of course, Belle!" said Granny Mary. "Let's see what Johnny's got to say for wantin' to teck our girl away!"

"Yes, bring him in," said Young Jack.

"All right," murmured Belle, a little gasp in her speech, her face flushed up to her hair.

Sylvester informed Yvonne of the reason for Belle's departure, and Yvonne's face lit up. "You say Johnny Ooerters?"

"That's right, my love," said Farmer John encourag-

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ingly, rubbing up his side-whiskers. Aunt Deborah privately decided that Sylvester might as well have married a heathen Chinese.

There was a whispering beyond the door. Then Belle appeared, a timid smile upon her flushed face, and then Johnny Waters, in his Sunday "best," canary-coloured waistcoat and all, stood upon the threshold, and glanced sheepishly over his bowler hat.

"Come right in!" cried Farmer John. "Teck my chair, my lad!"

"Teck y' coat off, do," said Granny Mary, rising to help him.

"This is Mr. Waters," said Belle, blushing. And everybody except Gaffer and Yvonne twisted into constrained attitudes. "This is my father, Mr. Waters."

"'Ow do. Pleased to meechee," said Johnny, chuckling nervously as his hand was grasped. The formality of the affair frightened him, for he knew that they knew him, and had known him from childhood. But if Belle thought that this was correct, then it *was* correct. . . .

"And this is mother, and Granny Mary, and Sylvie, whom you know, and this is Sylvie's wife, Yvonne," went on Belle, in an agony of confusion.

"Pleased to meechee! 'Ow do! Pleased to meechee, I'm shore!" said Johnny again and again, his long, thin face getting redder and redder. He gaped at Sylvester's beard, and muttered something about a "beaver." Yvonne gave him a pleasant little smile as a tribute to his merry monkey face and festive air.

By a pardonable oversight Gaffer John was omitted from the formality. Johnny was forced into Farmer John's chair beside the fire. He winked confusedly at Sylvester, and grinned at Yvonne, but, realizing his mistake, became a fountain of perspiration. But chiefly he was conscious of the grim mother of Belle, the enemy of his suit. He rubbed his hands together in the silence that followed the scrape of Farmer John's chair.

"Warm night," he said, moving his shoulders up and down, and rubbing his hands.

"Yes," said somebody.

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Then they all looked at the fire.

Johnny cleared his throat with an important air.

"Teck that overcoat off, Mr. Waters, do!" said Granny Mary.

"No, thanks! Oh, no!" gabbled Johnny. "I like to keep me overcoat on! Ever since I bin a child. . . . I meanter say——!"

"Well, how's the shop doing now, Johnny?" asked Young Jack, rescuing him from himself.

"Oh, pretty well, thanks! . . . Yes. . . . They sold me up, o' course, yesterday. That's the second time."

"Oh," said Jack, at a loss for words.

And again they all looked at the fire.

"I wonder y' get orders enough in Crawford," said Aunt Deborah grimly.

"Oh, I *do*!" said Johnny emphatically. He became transparently confidential. "I picked up nearly seventeen shillin' last wik, Mrs. Winterton! . . . Yes! . . . But I couldn't pay me bills, on the nail like, so they come an' took off wi' the stuff. But by next wik I expect I'll be pounds in!"

"In debt?" she asked.

"Eh? Oh, no! In pocket. An' y' see, it's reglar, like, reglar money." He stopped suddenly, for Granny Mary was smiling at his implication. He coughed, and everybody, particularly Belle, shuffled uncomfortably.

"Oh, yes," said Granny Mary.

"A chap dunna wanterbe gettin' a quid—pound one wik an' twenty-five shillin's the next an' five bob the next, does 'e?"

"Not if ae's thinkin' o' gettin' married, Johnny!" said Granny Mary mischievously.

Johnny heard her good-nature, and suddenly blared out into a great throaty laugh that whistled in his nose. And everybody breathed in relief.

"Run an' get y' clothes on, if y' want to go out, Belle," said Granny Mary.

"It's gettin' on. D'y' want to go out?" asked Aunt Deborah coldly.

"No," said Belle, in a faint voice.

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"Dunna you, Johnny?" asked Granny Mary.

"Me? Oh, *no!*" Johnny said emphatically, as in surprise at the question. But his heart sank at the miserable lie. "I bin on the trot all day."

"I 'avena seen y' at chapel, not for some time, Mr. Waters," said Aunt Deborah. "But per'aps y' go over to the chapel at Ruggen'am?"

Poor Johnny squirmed. "Well, y' see, Mrs. Winterton, I work late, an' I've bin 'avin' Sunday in bed, like."

Aunt Deborah pursed her grim lips, and shook her head vigorously.

"But y' find time for an hour's courtin' on Sunday nights I'll be boun', Johnny!" said Granny Mary.

"You bet I do!" laughed Johnny, to cover his own and Belle's confusion. And then he became conscious of two great ox-eyes staring at him from the other side of the fireplace. Gaffer was considering the stranger; he had already spent some time in contemplation of Sylvester, whose beard disguised him. Johnny shivered.

But here came a knock at the door, and Aunt Deborah ushered in Miss Twitten.

"Come in, Sally," she said warmly. "This is Sylvie's wife, Yvonne."

"This is Miss Twitten," Sylvester informed his wife in French.

("Thought *she'd* come! Poking!" thought Belle.)

"Why, that isna Sylvie, sure——!" cried Sally, peering up at him. She looked more haggard than ever, he thought. "What, not Sylvie? Well I'm jiggered! He! He!"

("Haw! Haw!" grunted Johnny Waters.)

"Who's that?" said Sally, peering short-sightedly. "What, Johnny Waters?" She stared at him, her fertile brain awork with speculation. "Then, are you two——?" she began, turning to Belle.

"Come and sit down, Sally," said Granny Mary, almost pushing the gossip into a chair.

"Well, I want a rest, I can tell y'. . . . But I 'avena spoke to Sylvie's wife yet. . . . 'Ow are y', my dear? I 'ope I see y' well?"

## *Crowmarsh*

"Pleased to meechee, I'm shore!" said Yvonne, smiling gaily, and during the ensuing expressions of astonishment Johnny looked guilty.

"Yes, I *do* want a rest, granny," continued Miss Twitten, smiling like a martyr, but with her eyes turning from Yvonne's cigarette and bobbed hair and bangles to Johnny Waters sitting perspiring in his overcoat beside the fire. "I just called at Mrs. Hough's. Yes, an' bin treated wuss nor ever I thought possible under God's all-seein' eye! Yes! There I sits, from ha'past five 'til now, an' ur never so much as asked me if I could do wi' a cup o' tea! Sit there I did 'til I got the crawmp! Yes! Not that I wanted ur tea, course!" She looked disarmingly from one to another. Aunt Deborah glanced at the tea-pot. "No, the good Lord 'as raised me up friends, so I dunna lack nothin'!" (Here Belle shuffled wrathfully.) "If 'E'd only ha' gi'ed me me 'ealth an' strength! But my kidneys! . . . Why, 'ccordin' to what I can read, Mrs. Winterton, it's either that stones as big as y' fist form up, or else it's the decapitation o' the linin' o' y' pipes, like——!"

But here Johnny suddenly blared out through his nose, and everybody started.

"Eh?" said Gaffer John.

"My lad, you be glad y' got y'r 'ealth an' strenth!" said Sally sourly. Belle glared at her. Johnny blushed, and shuffled his feet uncomfortably. Aunt Deborah cast a dark look upon him.

"Will y' 'ave a cup o' tea, Sally?" asked Aunt Deborah, with concern in her voice.

"Tea? Well, I dunno whether I dare, to tell y' the truth, Mrs. Winterton! Y' see, tea, drunk on a empty stomach, like, it 'as a bad effect on the kidneys, being so——!"

But here Johnny put a great hand over his rabbit teeth, and as everybody stared in wonder, tears ran down from his laughing eyes. Silently he rocked to and fro. At last he sighed heavily. "Oh, dear!" he murmured in a weak voice.

"What's gone wrong wi' you?" asked Miss Twitten aggressively.



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"Me? Oh, I gotta pain!" he said. "In me . . . me kidneys!" And again he had to clap his hand over his mouth. His body writhed. "I think I'd better go 'ome," he said in a choked voice, rising from his chair. "I should think so too!" said Aunt Deborah angrily. Silence fell upon them.

At last: "Good night, Mrs. Winterton," he said. "Sorry, 'n all that! . . . Good night, Sylvie! Good night, Mrs. Dawe. Good night, Mr. Winterton. Good . . . good . . . Haw! Haw! Haw!" roared Johnny, leaning weakly above Miss Twitten. Then he rushed hysterically from the house, with Belle in close pursuit.

Sally put down her head and wept like an orphan, so that hot tea and tart and much fussing were needed to solace her. Aunt Deborah scowled. Yvonne and Sylvester exchanged intimate glances of amusement.

### 4

He had taken her up to his old studio, and there, in the bat-haunted half-darkness he had told her the story of his father; and she stood, wondering and intrigued, before the painted figure upon the wall. When he had finished speaking he turned, his arm about her. "I'll get something and scrape it off," he said, with a hint of sadness in his voice, his clumsy shrug accompanying the words.

"No, you must not scrape it off!" she said urgently. "It must remain. It is beautiful, and I like to think of it and of you. No, do not destroy it!"

He shrugged again and led the way downstairs. Even yet the painting had power to stir him, and there was something of seeming reproach in the glance of that gaily-painted, absurd gipsy figure.

"I did not think it was as beautiful as this," she said softly, as they strolled in the garden before the house. "I thought England was ugly, dirty."

"It seems a little paradise of rest to me," he said. "After Paris."

## *Growmarsh*

"But so strange, so silent, so lonely. . . . Is there not a town nearer than . . . that one, Rugg—?"

"Ruggenham? No; that's the nearest. And there are only scattered houses between, as you saw."

She drew up the wrap from her shoulders to her slender neck, while her glance travelled, almost apprehensively, about the bosky, moonlit landscape. The air was still and bat-haunted, the lanes silent and goblin-ridden in the moonlight. Spectral flowering currant, that lit the garden in the daytime like fairy lamps of raspberry hue, now gave out a sweet odour, and rock stars shone whitely upon the borders, while over all was a clean, pungent, earthy smell that scented the night like a sweet presence. Upon such nights the fairies played about the Home Field, and amid the trees on Bluebell Wood grotesque elves held high revel, and Puck stole forth from the covert to play his merry pranks. For the fairies still live in the country; you may not see them with your sore town eyes, but Granny Mary had heard the patter of their feet, and had come upon their fairy ring, with the dew still freshly trampled about it, many times in the early morning hours. All was still, as it had been before humans were created, and the little folk governed the enchanted lanes.

"And at this moment, in Montmartre, all the world will be on foot," she said dreamily.

He thought of the lights and the music, the gay cafés and the mad revels; and, curiously enough, in spite of his urgent desire to be home and his relief at arriving, he felt a momentary regret. For never, he thought, would he see the great, gay, friendly, tawdry city again: Yvonne would gradually accustom herself to England and the country, and Paris would remain a memory. There had been many disappointments, of course, in his sojourn, many discomforts and much homesickness during the latter part, but, after all, Paris had given him Yvonne, and was so raised to the level of a land of romance. . . .

"You do not regret marrying the foreigner?" he whispered.

## *The Golden Milestone*

"You say?"

There were still moments when his tongue baulked them.

"You do not regret marrying me, Yvonne?"

"I? Do I regret? Ah no, it would be foolish to regret. . . . And besides, I love you, my husband." She offered her lips. "But it is necessary that I quickly adjust myself. It is so strange, the silence, the little roads empty of people, and the darkness of the trees."

"But you think that you will not find it difficult?" he asked. For the first time he was disturbed for her happiness. Yvonne in the garden at Crowmarsh, and her evident unrest, forced the thought that she might be unhappy here into his consciousness. "If it is too difficult, Yvonne, we will return. I will take you back at all costs, even if I have to work in the gutter!"

"You will take me back?"

"To Paris, or to Brive, or to Timbuctoo, if you can't manage to live here!"

She looked up into his face. "And you? You would like it so, to go to Paris or Brive?"

"I? . . ." He stared away from her into the darkness of the lane. "I like your likes, that is all."

"But *would* you, Sylvie?" she insisted.

"Well, not at present. I must get to work and help Jack with this duck-farming, so that you may live in comfort, perhaps, and so that we can afford our little trips abroad. But there must be much hard work, and even then the result is doubtful, of course. If the farm succeeds—these ducks, I mean—why, then it will be in the nature of a miracle, to my mind. . . . But you, Yvonne, if you can't . . . can't endure it, then back we go!"

She laughed softly, feeling secure. "It is well, so! . . . And I knew that you would not keep me here if I found it impossible. . . . I hope I do not. I will try very hard, Sylvester, to be happy here, so that you may succeed with your work, and be happy, too, my dear!"

She peered out at the night, her dark face never more beautiful than in the moonlight. He bent to kiss

## *Crowmarsh*

her, his heart flooding with the humility of love, his tongue unable to frame words to answer her. After a time: "I think it would be well for you to return to the house now, Yvonne. We go to bed early here, and the dew is falling, and you have nothing on your head," he said.

She pressed the hand that held her own, and smiled to herself in the secrecy of the moonlight. "Yes, at once, m'sieu!" she said. "But who is there in the lane?"

Two figures approached and stood silhouetted before a gate that led to the labourers' cottages. And the watchers heard the nasal murmur of Johnny Waters's voice. Yvonne squeezed her husband's arm, stifling a little gurgle of laughter. The two silhouetted figures grew insensibly closer. Yvonne turned and hurried him back to the house. "Oh, that Johnny!" she laughed. "The little flowers, they are charming, Sylvester."

He gathered a loose handful of the raspberry-coloured blossom and rolled it into a ball. "For your pillow, Yvonne!" he said, gravely presenting the odorous ball.

She gravely returned a handful. "For yours, m'sieu!"

In country sport he flung the petals about her head, and, laughing like children, they raced round into the courtyard. But before the door she turned and whispered: "At July, for the fête, is it not?"

"July? Oh, yes!"

"Oh, yes!" she mocked in English.

"Yes, we will return at July and compare experiences with Berthe and Anatole, if you so wish," he said.

"Kiss me before we go in," she whispered. "I am hungry for kisses."

## CHAPTER XV

### THE FIRST DAY

#### I

THE clattering clogs of the womenfolk below roused Yvonne about nine. She awoke after laboured breathing and started up in a terrified manner, the clatter below in her ears. Into her happy dreams had come some terrible shadow, some dim form of terror that had clutched at her in the impotence of sleep. She passed her hand across her face, striving to recall the details. She laughed and shrugged to inspirit herself, and, rising, crossed to the window.

England, she thought, looking out to Lovers' Lane and the Abbey river dreaming in the morning stillness. There were darker colours than Paris showed : the greens held more blue and the skies less. A curious, smoke-coloured sky, the winter sky of Paris. But yet beauty abode here, in the flowers and the stippled green upon the hedges and the blue spaces of the covert beyond the river. Always and everywhere, it seemed, there was beauty.

She saw William George Waddell. He was peering furtively round the end of the wing, searching the windows for a sign. She smiled and waved to him. He waved in return and then disappeared in a torment of amatory confusion.

But soon he reappeared, showing a great posy of hazel catkins.

"A conquest, as Berthe would say," laughed Yvonne to herself, and throwing a wrap over her pyjamas, she ran lightly down to the kitchen.

Aunt Deborah and Granny Mary turned at her en-

## The First Day

trance and stared in alarm at her attire. Belle had gone down to the village.

"Good morning!" said Yvonne in English and kissed them. Then, smiling at her stammering tongue: "I go . . . Ooilyam Jorge . . . *les fleurs!*" she said, and went to the door.

"But you can't go out like that, child!" said Aunt Deborah.

"No?" said Yvonne.

"Oh no, you mustn't. . . . What on earth is the girl about?"

"Your clo'es, Yvonne," said Granny Mary.

"Clo'es?"

"These," said Granny Mary, touching the open collar of the girl's pyjamas.

"Ah, no!" said Yvonne, thinking they thought she would take cold. That it might not be *comme il faut* to appear below-stairs in such attire never occurred to her, for among her Montmartrois circle of friends one took tea in pyjamas and sat knitting upon the balcony over the street in pyjamas, and one even sometimes received one's friends in pyjamas. "I go just a little. . . . Ooilyam Jorge. . . . *Ah, c'est difficile,*" she ended, shrugging. She blew them a kiss, and went to the door.

Aunt Deborah's face grew grimmer. "Shameless!" she muttered.

"Eh, no, it must be their way," said Granny Mary. "Y' mustna judge ur by our way, Deborah. But——"

They stood in perplexed silence for a moment.

"Ur must come in! If anybody sees ur they'll think we've gone mad to allow it!" said Aunt Deborah, her grim face dark with displeasure, the tiny nerve twitching beside her mouth, her thin, tall figure stiff with indignation and alarm as she strode to the door.

"No, let me go, Deborah," said Granny Mary, anxiously following her. "I'll persuade the lassie to come in. . . . If it wanna for that forrin language, drat it!"

But Aunt Deborah proceeded to the door. "I'll fetch ur!" she said grimly. Granny Mary followed her into the courtyard, alarm for the upshot in her old blue eyes.

## *The Golden Milestone*

But Yvonne was not in the courtyard, nor upon the drive. She had admired Willum George's posy, and had asked the name of the catkins. William George, thinking she desired to know where they grew, had pointed to the hedge adjoining the road. And Yvonne had strolled across the corner of the Home Field, and went picking her way daintily, for fear of soiling her satin slippers, never dreaming that strangers might pass along the lane upon the other side of the hedge, in this abandoned garden of a world.

"Shameless!" muttered Aunt Deborah again, her hand upon the gate that led into the Home Field.

"No, let me go, Deborah!" pleaded Granny Mary. "Or let Sylvie go. Ae's over there wi' Jack by the pens. There ae is. Sylvie! *Sylvie!*" As he turned she beckoned him. "Let Sylvie go, Deborah."

"Somebody ought to go, an' teck a 'oss-whip!" said Mrs. Winterton vigorously.

"I'll go!" said Willum George eagerly.

"*You!*" He wilted as she turned darkly upon him. "You get off to y' work! There's squitch enough to meck a bonfire big's the 'ouse, an' all that stone-pickin'! An' I see y' avena opened the ventilators in the cow-'ouse, neither. You get off to y' work, or I'll pack y' off 'ome, y' lazy young 'ound!" Sylvester came up, and she silently indicated his wife at the hedgerow. "All the country'll be talkin' about we!" she said, her old condemnation of him in her brilliant grey eyes.

"There's no one about, and she's near home, and on our own ground," he said, grinning at the situation as he hurried off.

But a limping, hobbling wild figure peered over the hedge, its eyes starting from its head, its arms and stick waving wildly. It was old Mobberley.

"Down theer!" he gasped. "A-pickin' flowers! . . . Lord a mussy me! I seed ur theer, like one o' these 'ere ghostses, ur was! But I knowed what it was right off, I did! Ah! I onct 'ad a nevvie what went off like that, a-walkin' in 'is sleep!" And as Sylvester hurried on with a scowl down the hedgerow: "Dunna starkle ur,

## The First Day

lad, dunna waken ur 'urried—genkle does it!" the voice pursued. "Be careful now! Dunna starkle ur, lad! Genkle does it!" And after a fierce glance, and a sigh of satisfaction that he had lived to see the day, he tottered down from the hedge, gathered together strength and breath, and hurried on to scatter the news.

Yvonne, who had heard the old man bawling, was returning, and her dark face, so beautiful behind the mass of catkins, showed alarm at hearing the strange old man.

"The road? It is not a public promenade?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes it is, you bold woman!" Sylvester replied, laughing gaily.

She laughed in response. "I did not think so! It is droll, isn't it? That old man there, peering over the hedge!"

"But you must be careful, Yvonne," he said, thinking of the future. "It is not *comme il faut* to walk so, in England."

"Ah, but I was not in the lane, the hedge screened me, and I thought there was not a soul for miles about," she said.

"No, it is not that. People here are—are more serious than in Paris. It is considered not *comme il faut* to appear so, even in the house. Even anywhere except in your room."

She glanced up, frowning, saw Aunt Deborah's face, and knew where to look for the attack. But Aunt Deborah turned and stalked back to the house, leaving Granny Mary to meet the delinquent. And Granny Mary met her, of course, with kisses.

"She is angry with me?" said Yvonne in broken English.

"Oh, no!" fibbed Granny. "But you must run indoors, love, an' change now." And turning to Sylvester: "You've told ur?"

"Yes. She understands now. Aunt's a fool to act like that."

"Ah, never mind," she said, patting his arm protectingly as they turned to go to the house. "You know 'ow



## *The Golden Milestone*

Deborah's bin brought up. Ur dunna understand. . . . Belle's come back, an' I've told ur to leave the work an' put ur 'at on an' show Yvonne the place. Not that there's much to see for such as ur, used to the town, but it may 'elp ur to find ur feet."

"I go," said Yvonne, bending to kiss the warm apple cheeks. "Pardon me."

"Dunna you fash y'self about it, my love," said Granny Mary.

Aunt Deborah stared hard as Yvonne entered, but said nothing, turning again to her oven.

"You are angry wiz me?" asked Yvonne anxiously. "I have—I am sorry. Pardon me, madame."

Aunt Deborah glanced at her face, and then clumsily kissed her. "Dunna fret y'self, child," she said, giving her a rough pat on the cheek. "But dunna do it again."

"Sank you!" said Yvonne. And throwing her arms about the stiff, scraggy neck of Aunt Deborah, she kissed her warmly, again and again, as if she would evoke love beneath the warmth of her kisses. "Pardon me," she whispered.

"Oh, that's all right," replied Aunt Deborah in some embarrassment. But the hard lines about her mouth had softened at the girl's attack upon her heart. "Dunna you worry. I dunna expect you understood, if the truth was knowed. 'Ere, *that'll* tell y' better'n words, I expect," she said, kissing Yvonne. "Now run off an' change, an' be a good gel in future."

But when Yvonne had gone and Sylvester came in her face darkened again. "You've told ur?" she asked.

"Yes."

"It's a good job, too!" she said, turning her back upon him with a grunt of anger. "Nice thing!"

He shrugged, and went back to the duck pens. And anxiety went with him.

Again, in the early hours of the following morning, a bad dream disturbed Yvonne's sleep; some intangible

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shadow, vaguely reminiscent of the shadow that previously disturbed her sleep, had crept upon her, enveloping her, crushing the happiness from her heart, and filling her with the exquisite pain that attends the threat of an unknown horror.

She cried out, awoke upon the instant, and found Sylvester sleeping heavily beside her. Sighing in relief, she endeavoured to sleep again, but thought intruded until she was considering wakefully the recent change in her life. She thought of Paris and of Montmartre, of the Rue Antoinette and the *Trois Petis Porcs* and the *Bal Tabarin* and the Rue Rochecouart, and then, mournfully, of Berthe in the south of France. She tried to remember scraps of detail to make a picture of the town of Brive as a background to the dear, plump figure of her sister, but the background was vague and unreal. The trend of her thoughts abruptly turned, and she considered her mistake of the morning, and the people of the farm, her husband's relatives, and, thinking of them, she moved from his side as far as the bed would allow in an attempt to reach privacy, though unconscious herself of the attempt. They seemed very *English*, a very foreign family. One by one she called up their images before her, and first came Aunt Deborah, that resolute, grim and forbidding figure, hard to love, withdrawn from the rest by something . . . some influence. . . . A curious woman, weighed down by trouble, it seemed. . . . Yvonne moved uneasily in her bed and turned in relief to the next figure, that of Granny Mary with the apple cheeks and the *pervenche* blue eyes and kindly old smile—a sweet one, she decided; then Belle of the friendly spirit and the merry heart and the hideous clothes that accentuated her tendency to *embonpoint*—dear Belle; Farmer John, so grand and *gros*, with his tow-coloured side-whiskers and spindle legs and wheeze, a pleasant, fatherly man, who seemed on good terms with the world; Young Jack, so much more *English*-looking than Sylvester, so clean and fresh and kindly and yet so silent—a *jeune homme amiable*, but too shy; and Gaffer . . . Poof! None of the family

## *The Golden Milestone*

seemed really happy, as the Montmartrois understands the word, not even Granny Mary; they seemed to brood in the silences upon some family spectre. Money, perhaps? . . . They did not speak joyously and gesture vivaciously; they were guarded and reserved, and they chained their emotions as if they were afraid of them. Particularly that Aunt Deborah. But did she *ever* have emotions? Not by appearances . . . a woman of granite. Puckishly her imagination presented her with the picture of Aunt Deborah, clad in ballet dress, dancing upon a table in Montmartre, and she chuckled at the amazing picture. Then, for some time, as she dwelt upon the real Aunt Deborah of the dark kitchen of the farm, apprehension held her.

That dear Place du Tertre! And the house where Sylvester had lived . . . that eve of the new year. . . . She wandered off into a dream of Paris.

When she returned to her thoughts of the family her relations with its members occupied her attention. Obviously she must not commit blunders like that of the previous morning, for Sylvester's sake; and she must learn the ways of the English quickly, for everybody's sake. . . . She sighed at the thought, so foreign and stupid did those ways seem to her. In spite of their evident kindness they seemed so remote, so alien. . . . Yes . . . so stupid and heavy. She remembered that Sylvester had once been like that. . . . His beard . . . it was an unfortunate thing he had done, to cut it off. But she still loved him, loved him more and more. . . . Yet, although he had been so heavy he had altered, approached vivacity, become more alive to the world. Might not they be made to lose their heaviness, to enjoy life? Or would Sylvester relapse, become stupid and *English* again, in these surroundings? Might not she herself catch the infection? . . . She shuddered at the thought.

But they were *his* people, and it was imperative that she and they should be more amicable. And so musing, in the early hours of the morning, she planned an attack on their hearts. She would make of each one a friend

## The First Day

glad for her coming. Even Aunt Deborah. Yes, Aunt Deborah should be given a double dose of love, and so vanquished. Oh, she could do it! She would snare them into loving her, and if her snares were of no avail, she would force their love by a direct attack upon their hearts. They should be happy, all of them together. . . . Until July . . . July! . . . Three months and less. . . . Even it might be possible to make them gay. . . . Three months or less! . . . Sleep overtook her amid her eager plans for July, and in her sleep the plans, transfigured and glorified beyond reality, were continued.

And in the next room, within six feet of her head, Aunt Deborah, awakened by her cry, lay thinking of the new-comer, her heart oppressed by a nameless sorrow. So much there was to condemn in her. The jewellery she wore! (*That's* where Sylvester's money had gone, she decided wrongly.) Ur was a piece o' vanity, from head to foot, if nothing worse. What effect would her presence have upon Belle—Belle, who already was inclined to rebel? . . . Aunt Deborah's lips grew grimmer as she decided that there should be no effect if *she* could help it. But it would be wise to keep an eye open: you know what girls are. . . . Vanity. And so free with herself. No shyness . . . no modesty, perhaps. . . . No, one must not think *that* about the girl; one must be charitable. The girl was little older than Belle, after all. Yet what ways she had, particularly with the men. Suspicious, that. . . . The sooner they had a child the better. . . . The way she kissed Sylvester, her mouth pressed to his until everybody was embarrassed, even Sylvester himself, and her arms thrown wildly about his neck in abandon. Why, yes, it *was* shameful, and that was the end of it. . . . And smoking cigarettes! And once she had ruffled Jack's hair, and thrown them flowery currants at him. But if she tried *that* there would soon be friction. . . . And then this morning!

Aunt Deborah sighed with recurring indignation at the thought. Of course they would be talking about it all over the village, Old Mobberley and that Mrs. Earp and her daughters. . . (Thank God her Jack had escaped

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that lot! She had thought once . . . that little Maudie Earp . . . No. . . .) But let 'em talk! She would take care there should be no recurrence of the shameful incident. Shameful? "Shameful" wasn't the word! (She moved indignantly in the bed.) . . . What a dark face the girl had. Was she really *clean*? But as she hadn't much godliness she would probably have little thought to cleanliness. She certainly didn't *look* it, with that olive skin of hers. . . . And so thin, except for her arms and breasts. What kind of mother would *she* make?

But one must not be uncharitable. After all, the evil was done: she was Sylvester's wife, and one had to put up with it. But one could help her, if she would take helping. After all, she was only a young girl, whatever she was, and far from her kith and kin. . . . Why, it might have been Belle! . . . (And then she snorted at the comparison.) No, one must be a Christian in all things. It was not *her* way to shirk her duties. And this girl needed watching, helping . . . yes, *loving*, if she would accept one's love. . . . One was often irritable and cross: it was a bad failing. But with Farmer on the beer, and Jack likely to visit the Goat's Head any time, and the farm's debts getting bigger every day, one could not help being irritable. . . . (That duck-farm . . . it *might* do all right. . . .) If only she could save Jack from the beer. (In the darkness her brilliant grey eyes moved scornfully, angrily towards the bulky excrescence that represented her husband at her side.) . . . Like father, like son, they would be saying. . . . Oh God, You Who are so powerful, help me to protect Jack from the beer! Oh Jesus, so gentle in Your pity, pity me in this my trouble! Oh Holy Angels, protect him and guard him from the beer! Amen. . . . (She sighed heavily after the prayer). . . . And that little wench wouldn't be the worse for a prayer. "*As ye do unto the least of these My little ones, so do ye unto Me.*" . . .

She slipped quietly from the bed and knelt beside it, her grim, forbidding face pressed into the cup of her

## *The First Day*

worn hands. . . . Oh God, give me tolerance, that I so much lack, yet let me not be tolerant of aught that is evil. This little girl You have placed in my home . . . so wilful and vain . . . brought up in such fashion . . . dear Lord, help me, a poor sinner, to love her as You would Yourself. You know, Lord, the troubles under which I labour, but oh, Great God, let not my troubles make me treat this little maid unjustly. Give me tolerance, Lord. You know how hard I try to do right! You know how many times I baffle my own good wishes. Lord, let me do right by her, not for gain, nor for hope of Heaven, but for Jesus' sake. Amen. . . .

Her feet were bare, the edge of the coarse night-gown scarcely covering the ankle, and the insteps of her feet were wrinkled and finely patterned with lines, the heels covered with thick, dark cuticle, the toes misshapen and curiously bent. In her night-gown you saw the thinness of her body, her gaunt arms and neck, and the size of her country hands and feet; but her suppliant attitude was as typical of her spirit as it would have been startling to a watcher.

She looked merely an ageing, ugly woman, but the morning light from the window threw a faint halo about the bent head.

## CHAPTER XVI

### GREETING

ON the first Sunday after Yvonne's arrival at the farm there was a party of relatives and friends bidden to come to tea and to make of the day a kind of Crawford wedding feast.

All day long Yvonne sped about the house, from kitchen to parlour, in joyful anticipation of the feast. There were relatives and friends to be met, she knew, and everybody wore best Sunday clothes, so that she herself had donned her best gown of jade green georgette trimmed with silver, and flitted about the dark rooms among their drab clothes and the sombre furniture like a human peacock with light imprisoned in its wings. Once or twice she sensed that Aunt Deborah was thinking of her and furtively glancing at her, so that Yvonne glanced down at the short slit skirt and silk stockings and satin shoes, wondering if she was all right behind, or whether Aunt Deborah was wondering if she would disappoint the relatives. But it was not the dress nor the trim ankles it displayed that worried Aunt Deborah at the moment: she had not yet recovered from the morning shock of finding that the girl was a Catholic. Sylvester had informed Yvonne that they must attend the chapel with the family, but the thought that a Protestant chapel was barred to Catholic Yvonne had not reached him. So that in all innocence they had trooped off to the village, making a curious company. Following age-long custom, Aunt Deborah and Farmer John walked in front, Aunt Deborah striding out determinedly, with head stiffly erect and her worn prayer-book in her gloved hand, her lips furtively moving about a "humbug" or a peppermint (which were

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her Sunday luxuries), while Farmer John went stoutly beside her, yet with a remnant of country sheepishness in his manner, his feet out-turned, his big, flabby hands reaching for his breeches pockets and being continually denied. Then, behind, had come Belle and Yvonne, their arms linked in Granny Mary's, who so far forgot the Sabbath as to marvel at the fact that the postman now came upon a motor-cycle, the letters in a sidecar, and she related to Yvonne some of the trials the innovation had placed upon the villagers. Behind, again, had come Sylvester and Young Jack, talking openly of ducks, and last of all Gladys May, Sammy Stewart, the wizened farm hand, and Willum George, for Aunt Deborah would not deny to her servants, nor allow them to deny themselves, the Blood of the Lamb. So had gone the procession, a curious, subdued company, clothed as for a funeral, while about the lanes the flowers bloomed and the hedges burgeoned with green, and the birds sang, worshipping God in their several ways. But each day was holy for the birds and flowers: their life was a perpetual Sunday of praise and thanksgiving.

It was at the chapel door that the horrible knowledge came to the light of day. Yvonne had been talking gleefully in French to the old minister, but on the threshold of the tiny chapel she had suddenly paused in doubt. Aunt Deborah had turned, thinking, with kindly thought, that the girl was shy. "Oh. . . . I do not think I may enter!" Yvonne had said hurriedly in French to her husband. "Why not?" he had asked. "What does the girl say?" Aunt Deborah said. Yvonne asked: "It is not Catholic, is it?" And then Aunt stiffened.

"Catholic? What do you say?" she asked.

"It ees not Catholic?"

"Of course not, child! *Catholic!*" she grunted, resenting the word.

"She . . . she is a Catholic, of course," Sylvester had said, miserably foreseeing the result.

"What?"

"I have . . . I am Catholic, madame!" Yvonne had said.



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"Humph!" Her tone said that it only needed this revelation to complete the horrible picture of French life and morals she had drawn. "Well, this is news!"

For some time they had stood in despair upon the doorstep, while curious glances were cast at them by the worshippers. Then Aunt Deborah had asked what they were going to do about it, and Yvonne, knowing naught of Protestant training, was surprised and pained at the hostility in her voice. "Why, anybody'd think y' thought our religion wasna as good as y' own!" Aunt Deborah had said. Then Yvonne had elected to go back, and Sylvester had gone with her, while for Aunt Deborah the peace had departed from the holy day.

In her phrase it had "topped it up." There had been the few moments of embarrassment for Yvonne and Sylvester, and then they forgot. But Aunt Deborah remembered.

Everything was in party trim at four o'clock, and upon the parlour table was a white wedding-cake that Aunt Deborah had baked and Granny Mary had iced with their own hands.

"I wisht there was a few ribbins, like, to show the place off!" said Granny Mary, who was busy with the bowls of flowers. "But I'll see there's some when our Belle brings ur young man from the church!"

Belle smiled and pretended to rumple Granny's party *coiffure*, saying: "Perhaps we shan't invite gay young sparks like you, Granny!" Her face was flushed with pleasure, for was not Johnny Waters invited to the party? Aunt Deborah had been overruled by Young Jack and Sylvester, who had now taken Johnny into partnership in their venture. Johnny would be here in all his absurd Ruggenham finery, thought Belle. If only . . . She looked from Yvonne's jade green loveliness to her old black silk that had seen many moons . . . if only she could dress like Yvonne! The thought took away her breath.

Soon the carts came rumbling up the drive, and in came Granny Phyllis, her keen black eyes searching for

## Greeting

Yvonne, Aunt Martha as pre-occupied with her pretended ailments as usual, Mr. Redfin with an immense posy of cowslips in his brown coat, Uncle James looking grimmer and harsher and coarser than ever, his shrewish wife following, then Marion Briscoe, looking very handsome and cool, like a white country rose on the eve of its full blossoming, her mother, and then Johnny Waters in his lemon waistcoat and stand-up collar and bowler hat and a new puce tie that matched his canary-coloured waistcoat and salmon-coloured socks to a nicety. All brought a little present for the returned couple, and it was a strange sight to see Yvonne, so beautiful and dark and lissomly shining in her gay finery, holding the new washing "dolly" that Aunt Kate had brought her, and thanking them in her queer English for their presents. (Aunt Kate afterwards mimicked her to a circle of farm wenches.) Sylvester threw his arm about her shoulders and loved her very much at that moment.

They were embarrassed in her presence, glancing furtively when she was not looking, like children, and listening to her bits of English and quick French with cow-like stares. It was a relief to them all when Aunt Deborah rose to go into the parlour. And as they rose to follow Miss Twitten blew in, ostensibly with seven new-laid eggs and a small cloth mat to sell. She was prevailed upon to stay to tea.

After grace Sylvester and Marion Briscoe crossed glances. She now sat beside Jack. They smiled, and he felt very friendly towards her, for had she not, by her refusal of him, made possible the dower of Yvonne's love? Yet there was shame, too, in his face: he remembered his proposal to her, and realized what an egoistical fool he had been. Why hadn't he seen himself in that light before?

"Well, I canna get over ur bein' a French wench," said Aunt Kate, staring anywhere but at Yvonne. "It does seem queer, like, ur bein' 'ere. . . . What's that y' got on, Sylvie?" she asked.

He touched his flowing, black silk tie. To Yvonne's

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chagrin he had cut off his beard. "This? . . . Oh, everybody wears them like this over there."

"Oh, I think it mecks 'im look *romantic*!" cried Miss Twitten with an arch glance at Johnny Waters. "I *do* think men dress nice nowadays. . . . But that beard ae 'ad! Did y' see that, Mrs. Winterton? Oh, it was lovely an' black, an' ae looked like . . . like in the books, y' know. An' roguish, too, I mean!"

"'Elp y'selves! You'm all welcome, that you bin!" said Farmer John jovially, stroking down his side-whiskers. "There's bin a mort o' weddin's i' this farm, but this is the fust time as it's bin a French missis." He was grateful to Sylvester, for since the coming of Yvonne respect for him had increased at the Goat's Head. "An' I'm in be'opes as it'll be a 'appy life, with a full stockin' an' cows i' the barn!"

"You'll be gettin' about on the farm agen, then, lad?" said Farmer James to Sylvester. "Seems y'll ha' to, come to that."

"Yes," said Sylvester shortly.

"Oh, they're goin' to do tremendous things!" cried Granny Mary.

"What, wi' ducks?" Farmer James threw a derisive glance at his wife. "Haw! Haw!"

"*Ducks!*" murmured Aunt Kate to the ceiling. "Y' canna teach y' granny to suck eggs, lad!"

"I dunna think I ever did suck one, if y' ask me," said Granny Phyllis without looking up.

"But ae can teach ur wheer the nice gels come from," said Farmer John.

"True," said Granny Phyllis. "An' I wisht to God"—Aunt Deborah started—"as I could up an' speak wi' the lassie wi'out 'avin' to get ur all in a scrobble wi' the talk!"

"Dang it!" said Granny Mary.

Yvonne caught their smiles, so different, yet so heartening, and smiled in return.

"I'm sure we're both pleased at the kind way you've welcomed us," said Sylvester, and translated the words for his wife.

## Greeting

"But yes! Sank you—*tout le monde!*" said Yvonne, and they all nodded and beamed at her, so that the table was in quite a commotion, and Gaffer John looked up under his great eyebrows from a feeble attack upon a cream horn. Yvonne had coaxed him into Sunday clothes and to the table—remarkable achievement! She had told Sylvester, with a chuckle of merriment, that he was her latest conquest.

"Fancy, 'ow funny it is—ur not bein' able to know what we say, poor body," said Sally Twitten.

"Oh, ur unnerstands a lot," said Farmer John, who rather prided himself on being understood by Yvonne. He inbreathed mightily, and roared across the table: "Dunna ye, Yvonne? . . . Y'—know—what—we'm—sayin'—dunna—ye—my—lass?" His heavy eyes gleamed, his red face grew purple as he strove to pierce through the foreignness of the girl.

"Eh?" said Gaffer John stubbornly.

"*Qu'est-ce-que—?*" began Yvonne, and Sylvester translated.

"But yes, a little," she said.

"Fancy!" said Miss Twitten. "I read in a book called 'The French Markweeze' 'ow they say '*excusez-moy,*' an' funny things like that!"

Mr. Redfin, who had been glancing furtively at Yvonne, now looked big with speech. "What I say is long life an' bon santty!" he said.

"Sammy!" remonstrated his wife.

"*Ah, vous parlez français, m'sieu?*" asked Yvonne eagerly.

"Wee wee!" he said, proud colour dying his roughened cheeks. "Le gair . . . me," said Mr. Redfin, tapping his medal-ribbons, and then stroking his great moustache in affected modesty.

Granny Phyllis snorted, and he assumed a pained look.

"You were an English soldier?" asked Yvonne in French, curiously searching his strange little face.

"Wee wee," he said with a glance of weak defiance at Granny Phyllis.

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"Oh, fancy you bein' able to talk French," said Sally Twitten, whose interior organs seemed to have resumed their unobtrusive functioning. And as she reached over Yvonne to get bread and butter: "Excusez moy, my Cherry," she said, tapping Yvonne lightly upon the shoulder and beaming and giggling upon the company. "Isna it funny as they call one another my Cherry? It's in that book."

"Fancy callin' *you* my Cherry, Sally," said Mr. Redfin, and fell into such convulsions of laughter that he nearly slid beneath the table. Johnny guffawed.

"Sit up, an' be quiet, y' poppinjay!" snapped Granny Phyllis.

"And why not?" wailed Miss Twitten. "I 'ope as 'ow there isna nothin' in my appearance as is derrigatin' to a Christian?"

"Teck no notice, Sally," said Aunt Deborah contemptuously.

"And M'sieu Jack, he was . . . soldier?" asked Yvonne. "And M'sieu Johnny?"

"No, I was too young, Yvonne," said Young Jack in his grammar-school French. "Johnny also."

"Y'd be at school then, wouldna y', Johnny?" asked Mr. Redfin tolerantly.

"No," said Johnny. "They'd just weaned me!"

"It'd be a good job if they could wean y' from summat else," said Aunt Deborah, keeping a grim face before all their smiles.

Aunt Kate had been whispering and nodding to her hard-faced husband, and now he asked, in a tone of apparent casualness: "Was ur ever on the stage, Sylvie?"

"Who?" asked Sylvester.

"The missis," he said, his thin-lipped mouth fixed in a smile. One guessed that he was a man who had bandied many insults in his time. The company held its breath, for in Abbots Crawford the stage was still deemed a synonym for depravity.

"Yvonne?"

"Ah."

## Greeting

"No. Why?"

"Oh, nothin'," he replied, chuckling at his plate.

"It's a queer thing to ask," said Young Jack angrily.

"Oh, y' canna tell, when the gel comes so far, an' looks so much like it," said Farmer James stubbornly.

"He! He!" giggled his wife.

But before either Sylvester or Young Jack or Belle could retort, Granny Phyllis lifted her skinny old head. "Ur's a nice, sweet, dainty wench, that ur be, an' I mustna be by to 'ear ur miscalled, let me tell y' that, Jimmy Winterton!" she said, her old black eyes flashing. She cocked her head from side to side and glared at the table, her toothless gums working.

"Yvonne has no need of protection," said Sylvester, and they saw the colour in his dark face.

Farmer John smiled at his plate.

"Let them talk as will," said Aunt Deborah suddenly. "We'm satisfied wi' the wench, let who dunna like it lump it!" And the people of the farm were grateful to her. She was ever staunch to her own.

"*Comment?*" said Yvonne to Sylvester, wondering at their looks.

"A picnic to-morrow," said Marion Briscoe, as he hesitated.

Amid expressions of delight he explained to Yvonne, whose face lit up.

"There's a mort o' work to be done on the fields," said Aunt Deborah.

"Just for one day, Deborah," said Mrs. Briscoe. "And we'll all go up into Bluebell Wood."

"Yes, mother?" asked Belle eagerly.

She hesitated, but catching Mrs. Briscoe's glance: "All right," she said. And then: "*For what we 'ave received, Lord make us truly thankful.*"

"Amen," they said, and rose from the table.

## CHAPTER XYII

### YVONNE MAKES SHORT HOLIDAY

#### I

Two weeks Yvonne spent in exploring the countryside, accompanied for the most part by Belle, and sometimes by Marion Briscoe. She climbed to the tower of the little church and saw how closely the village was beset by rising green fields, as if it were a little painted village at the bottom of an immense soup plate patterned green and brown. She saw that the single street, save for its slight bend near the market shelter, ran almost due north and south, and that the hole in which Crowmarsh lay was to the northwest, the farm hidden by the intervening ridge. She helped to take out the cattle to the fields and to bring the milch cows back; she watched the young men rolling the spring wheat and raking and burning rubbish and picking stones and straightening hedges and tending ducks, the number of which seemed to multiply daily. And she strolled in and about the village and the hamlet, peering into lanes and gardens and odd corners as if she sought something that could not be found.

One thing, at least, she found, and that was beauty in many forms. To her, so beautiful and yet so eager for beauty, the strange country flowers were things of untold beauty; each blossom and bud and twig, every green thing that grew, was dear to her for its beauty. Summer advanced on winged feet, without hesitation. Rain there was in plenty, but the winter was definitely past and one might hope to feel the sun hot upon the cheek. But in the meantime there was the delight of the early flowers. City-bred as she was, and having but vague memories of Brive, her country birth-place, she

## *Yvonne makes Short Holiday*

could not enjoy flowers in profusion; the sight was too heady, too unimaginably beautiful. No: she would take each flower and ask its name and con its beauty, finding keen pleasure in its single self, feasting at length upon it, and ever shocked into delight by new variations of colour and shape and fragrance. And, of course, Belle was an ideal guide for her. She showed primroses in the garden and a few in Bluebell Wood, and gillies and white tulips and dainty columbines, and ash flowers like bunches of red blackberries, with their quaint black buds that Yvonne called little moleskin birettas. And she pointed out the black swifts fleeting above the Home Field, and the redstart in the orchard, and gaunt herons sailing above the trees on the Uttoxley road. And one afternoon the sun was quite warm, turning the world into a gay playground, and the girls sat overlooking the farm from the edge of Bluebell Wood, while Johnny Waters lay about in graceful postures; and another day Marion Briscoe came and took her to the Briscoe Farm in Shooker's Lane; and another when Aunt Deborah asked Yvonne to accompany her to the village to take beef-tea and flowers and a little money to the two bedridden Misses Robinson; and another when she went with Sylvester and Young Jack in the combination to Rug-genham station to fetch incubators. And always she sought words; Sylvester had said, in Paris, that there would be no need for her to learn his tongue, that he would translate for her; but she, with more foresight than he possessed, had decided quickly that such a course was impossible, that until she could speak to them in their own tongue she would be an alien. She was a quick pupil, and at the end of the fortnight could stammer out little confidences to Belle in the strange language.

The villagers watched her, first covertly, then more openly, until at last her pleasant morning smile and her quaint "Good mornink!" were treasured. Octogenarians took on a new lease of life; the gossip of the village became an impressively rich mixture; the girls from the high schools glanced covertly as they passed, walking



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two by two, circumspectly through the village, and it may be imagined that she was minutely discussed in common-room and dormitory; and the village youths lost their hearts to her, and dreamed strange, gallant dreams o' nights. Not that she escaped speculative looks, for her escapade of the first morning was common property, and, in the minds of a few of the straiter sort, even her nationality condemned her. Belle was a splendid friend to her, of course, and protected her from indiscretions, as when Yvonne desired to enter the Goat's Head to obtain red wine or bock, or when she would have stopped to speak to two of the village "knuts" who called to her from a stile in Lovers' Lane. And as Belle, stammeringly, with vexed, puzzled tongue that strove earnestly for words, explained the code, Yvonne would stare, uncertain of Belle's sincerity. And sometimes she would mutter: "Stupeed." But Belle noticed, with generous content, that Yvonne never repeated her mistakes.

She found the whole countryside as delightful as a great garden. She explored it as one would explore an old garden—each alley, each aspect, each bed of flowers and each clump of bushes. She made out favourite nooks and corners and promenades; she discovered where one might drink milk or whey, or watch the cheese-making, or see the sturdy lambs and the rabbits and the young, frail-limbed foals in the fields. The quaintness of the village folk amused her, and the beauty of the countryside consoled her, in part, and softened her grief at leaving Paris. Here, she mused, with occasional visits to France, one might live and love and be happy without regretting too bitterly. All was amazingly crude in its appearances, its dress, its housing, its conveniences, and in its lack of the politer entertainments, yet it appealed to her by contrast and found favour by its novelty.

So for a fortnight she made holiday, and made the village her own, while Sylvester and Young Jack and Johnny Waters worked like men possessed at the foundations of their scheme. And every day Granny Mary

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urged Belle to leave the housework and play with Yvonne.

And every day, too, the enigmatical glances that Aunt Deborah cast at Yvonne after breakfast became less enigmatic.

### 2

It was Saturday morning, and Aunt Deborah talked at length to Sylvester in the kitchen of the farm, while Granny Mary listened anxiously, and Gladys May, behind the scullery door, rolled wondering eyes at the words of the missus.

"Of course, ur *must*, an' that's the long an' short on it," said Aunt Deborah, not vindictively, but as if she would force her reasonableness home to his mind. "If ur's goin' to be a proper wife to you ur's got to get ur sleeves rolled up an' work. An' it isna fair to Belle, to ask ur to work while Yvonne"—she always pronounced it "Evon" instead of "Ivon"—"while Yvonne is gaddin' off. I canna understand 'ow they bring 'em up over there, unless—unless ur's idle. An' I dunna want to think that."

"No," murmured Sylvester uncomfortably.

There was a short silence.

"No, course not, Deborah," said Granny Mary. "It's their ways, o' course. I expect the gels dunna 'ave to work over there."

"I should think not, indeed!" said Aunt Deborah indignantly. "But it isna worse than I thought. . . . An' 'ow do they keep their 'ouses, then, if they canna afford servants?"

"They *do* work, and hard," explained Sylvester, toying uneasily with the lapels of his tweed coat. "But . . . Yvonne hasn't been used to working in the house. Y' see, she and her sister Berthe used to work at shops." His aunt's glance was upon him, he saw.

"They earned money?" she asked.

"Yes, a little. Enough to rent their rooms and keep

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themselves and pay a charwoman to keep their rooms clean."

Aunt Deborah grimaced at the unhousewifely news. "But ur's got no money now?"

"No."

"Well, then," she replied conclusively.

He lounged over to the window, feeling acute discomfort at the situation. Yvonne was out there somewhere in the morning sun, somewhere in Crawford Park, surrounded by the flowers she loved, seeking easement for the pain of her parting with Paris, and they wanted to bring her back here, to slave in the dark kitchen. Yvonne amid the suds! It would be like harnessing a foal to a plough. But yet he saw, with his clearer insight, the reasonableness of Aunt Deborah; he knew that her request was made, not from ill-nature, but simply for the welfare of his future, for she believed that Yvonne had come to stay. And, of course, perhaps Yvonne *had*. As a poor farmer's wife Yvonne could not make holiday on every day in the year. And yet Granny Mary had said, "We can manage without ur, Deborah, and—who knows?—Sylvie may get enough money to keep 'is servant when ae sets up 'ouse." But in reply Aunt Deborah had asked. "An' 'ow if Sylvie dunna get enough money? What sort of a 'ome is ae goin' to 'ave then?" Was Aunt Deborah right? Almost he was persuaded that she was.

The situation irritated him. What had the household work to do with him? Just when he was busy, too, with these incubators and new pens! Oh, it was the very devil!

But Yvonne? He must protect her at all costs. If she must help in the house he must soften the blow for her. But ought she to work? . . .

"I'll see about it," he said impatiently, striding out of the room in a pet.

He had not yet pierced down to the root cause of the incongruous situation, nor would he for some months.

## Yvonne makes Short Holiday

### 3

Yvonne and Belle sat in a little nest of dried bracken on the edge of the coppice in the park. Through the dark trees, that were still thin and wintry, they looked out to the bright countryside, lying all green and gold, and dark blue where the woods came—all bathed and flecked by the wan May sun. A small tortoiseshell butterfly occupied Yvonne's attention, while Belle was making a posy of the last of the curled hyacinths, from which arose a heady, bitter-sweet smell, like a faint whiff from a far brewery; the girls had gathered the flowers from Granny Phyllis's garden.

As twelve struck from the church clock, "Te! Te!" muttered Belle. "I must go now, Yvonne."

Yvonne glanced up in surprise, and was puzzled by Belle's expression.

"You are not—you have not hunger?"

"No. But I promised mother I would come back at twelve."

"You have a journey? . . . a visit?"

"No. Mother wants me to help with the work."

Yvonne studied intently the round, pleasant face, her mind baffled by the language and the shifting sands of custom. Belle explained, using what Johnny Waters called "monkey-motions." ("You could always meck y'self understood by monkey-motions," he had said.)

"Ah, yes! To work. . . . It is necessairee?"

"For me? Oh, yes. Y' see, there's only Gladys May to help them, and lots o' work to do in a house like ours. You wouldn't believe!"

Yvonne glanced away, her mind held by some sudden thought. "You help . . . *toujours* . . . always? When I am not here? You . . . walk not . . . as we, now?"

"Oh, no. I'm just having a day or two off, just to show you round."

They were silent. Yvonne did not notice that the butterfly had gone. "You like it? The work of the house?"

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Belle grimaced. "It's all the same, like it or lump it," she said.

"*Ça ne fait rien?*" asked Yvonne acutely.

"San Fairy Ann? . . . Yes. It's got to be done."

As they rose Yvonne considered the idea. "You work . . . when that Johnny and you . . . when he is your husband?"

"I expect I'll have to," said honest Belle. "But a bit of housework breaks no bones. . . . But there's no need for you to come in, Yvonne. You know the way back, *chérie?*"

"Pardon?"

"You stay here. Stop here."

"No, I come with you," said Yvonne. Belle glanced anxiously at her face, but said nothing. If only one could talk the same language, properly, these things could be explained by a word and a look, she thought. . . .

When Yvonne entered the dark kitchen behind Belle there was surprise on Aunt Deborah's face. They showed their flowers, and then Yvonne tripped off gaily to her bedroom. Aunt Deborah handed Belle a clean sacking apron, and there was a frown on her grim face, a frown almost of anger. To let the girl spoil like that? It was all of a piece with his selfishness!

But a moment later the stair door opened, and there stood Yvonne, clad in a dark dress, a tiny laced apron, a handsbreadth across, before her.

"I come to work!" she said gaily.

Aunt Deborah grinned.

"Why, y' darlin', there isna no need for y' to be mytherin' y'self with it!" cried Granny Mary. "You go out into 'the blessed sunshine an' enjoy y'self! Go an' 'elp Sylvie an' Jack with the ducks, if y' want summat to do."

"Ah, no; it is necessairee that I work! Give it to me!" she replied, grasping the feather duster from Aunt Deborah's hand. "*Voyons!*"

And in a moment she had leaped lightly upon a chair, and was dusting pictures and ornaments and shelves. She carefully dusted "GOD IS LOVE" and the cheap

## *Yvonne makes Short Holiday*

alarm clock, and then, while they all stared, she dusted down Gaffer Johnny from his bald head and raying fringe of yellowish-white hair to his square-toed boots. And Granny Mary patted her chest in breathless merriment, Belle rocked with laughter, and into Gaffer's eyes came an incredible gleam of jocularity.

"Haw! Haw!" he chuckled wheezily.

Aunt Deborah smiled, her grim mouth, like the doorway of a gloomy keep, relaxing, and suddenly one glimpsed the laughing Belle in her face. And she sighed in something like relief.

The girl was amenable.

### 4

And afterwards Yvonne went no more to play in the beautiful garden of the countryside. Each morning at half-past six Aunt Deborah's knock sounded on the bedroom door, and the work of the day began. Monday was baking day, Wednesday washing day, and on Friday the house received its weekly overhaul. By a thousand merry tricks the newcomer endeavoured to bring smiles to their lips, and even Aunt was forced to admit that since her coming the dark kitchen had been a different place. She would sing French songs for them, and make extravagant love to old Gaffer Johnny, and dress herself in comic garb, yet always with an eye to the incalculable customs as observed by Aunt Deborah. These merry games took place at night, when she was not walking with Sylvester, or visiting relatives or being taken—against Aunt Deborah's wish—to an occasional dance in the village by Marion Briscoe; Belle was not allowed to accompany them. In the daytime there was little time for merry-making. Aunt Deborah, inspired by her sense of duty, kept the girl's nose to the grindstone. Yvonne now wore an apron of sacking, and her tiny feet, that had once been used to the smooth touch of chic shoes and Parisian ballrooms and the clean flags of Parisian boulevards, now slopped about in great clogs amid the muck

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of the farmyard. Her delicately manicured hands grew rough and red, the nails broken and sore, and, as she was not an adept in the use of bread-knives and potato-knives and axes, she seemed always, to Sylvester, to have one finger bound up in soiled rag. He watched her and her moods with hyper-sensitive solicitude. She was happy to all intents and purposes, and letters from Berthe and Marthe and poor Jean would make her radiant. He knew that her conduct had lulled to rest the suspicions of Aunt Deborah and the doubts of Granny Phyllis, and she was acute enough to abstain from worrying him with her troubles. But many times, as she talked alone in the heady spring dusk to Sylvester, the lanes about them and the clear, starlit sky above, with Bluebell Wood upon its hill needing only lights and a domed white church to transform it into the semblance of the Hill of Montmartre, she grew silent for a space, and then spoke passionately of France and of the return in July. And they would talk of what they would do, and of what they would say to Berthe and Anatole and the rest, and of how they would visit the *Trois Petits Porcs* and the *Bal Tabarin* and the *Bois* and all the gay world of Paris. And he would visualize anew the great city; always he seemed to remember best the great Rue Rochecouart and its lights and music and gay crowds. He would like to go back, yes, for a short stay, but not for long. Here his life must be led, among his own people, and he would buy a little house or farm—for, wonderful to find, the duck-farm promised to be successful!—and spend his life happily with Yvonne. She was settling down into the life with wonderful good sense, he saw, and when they came back after July they would come back for good.

And after their evening stroll they would return to the dark kitchen, the approach to which seemed always to still Yvonne's chattering tongue.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### REVOLT

#### I

ONE night in June, the day's work finished, the girls went upstairs to Yvonne's bedroom, and upon the strip of matting beside her bed Yvonne spread her trousseau, while Belle leaned attentively beside her.

"You see, it is best so," said Yvonne. "The costumes gay for Paris and July. And these" (she indicated a heap of costumes)—"for working, for then it matters not if they are dirty. . . . You say 'dirty'? . . . Yes, dirty. And these are for you, *petite!*" And she stood up, holding two gowns before the astonished Belle.

"What? For me?" she said, almost in a whisper, her glance searching the two gowns, one of russet silk touched with dull crimson, the other of pale blue trimmed with ninon and silver tissue. They were cut in the delightful French fashion, and although they were not new they evidenced the care with which all French girls choose and keep their dresses. And Belle's heart sank. "No . . . I couldn't!" she said, in miserable resignation.

Yvonne did not understand. "You take them from me? No? It is not the custom to do so?"

Belle kissed her, shaking her head. "No, it isn't that, Yvonne," she said.

"Then . . . why?"

Belle sighed, and turned away. "Mother wouldn't like it, wouldn't like me to wear things like that," she said.

It was some time before Yvonne could understand, and her beautiful face grew very dark in the candlelight. "But it is stupeed, so!" she said almost angrily. She had already taken furtive stock of Belle's wardrobe, but



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she could not understand that her own dresses were already spoken of in the village as "shameless trappings." She thought angrily of Aunt Deborah. Did the mother wish to keep the girl dowdy in order to discourage Johnny Waters (for Yvonne was shrewdly observant), or was she merely stingy? Of course, there was little money in the grim woman's purse; perhaps she simply could not afford it. Or was she proud? "She will not like that I give them to you?" she asked again, desperately.

"No," said Belle.

If she was proud, would she not be angry if Belle accepted it, thought Yvonne? Or was it simply the lack of money, and Belle was too sensitive to admit it? A look of cunning crept into the dark eyes of Yvonne. "*Eh bien,*" she said. "Put it on—this one. How do you say?"

"Do you mean 'try it'?"

"*C'est ça!*"

"What's the use?"

"I beg pardon."

Belle shrugged, and then, telling herself that she was only satisfying Yvonne's caprice, she allowed the girl to take off her old black costume.

"Not the stays, Yvonne!" she said, as Yvonne's fingers went busily to work.

"And why? Oh, but it is *nécessaire* to do so!" she replied, glancing curiously at the cumbrous article she had taken from about Belle's waist. "One minute, *ma chérie!*"

The russet silk dress was slipped over Belle's head, and Yvonne's deft fingers worked at its folds, while Belle glanced down in trembling delight. She patted her chest, and stared down in alarm at the low cut of the gown.

"But, Yvonne——!" she began.

"*Attendez!*" cried Yvonne, stepping back. "Now your hair. . . . Oh, it must be 'bobbed, so!" She bunched up Belle's crisp, fair hair in her hand, and held the tiny mirror so that Belle might squirm and twist about in an endeavour to see herself. And a flush had crept

into the plump cheeks. "*Voilà!* Now, one minute!" Yvonne cried enthusiastically, and raced over to her trunk, from which she returned with a tiny pair of pearl earrings. "These, also, are for you, my dear!" she said.

"But, Yvonne——!" began Belle again.

"Ah, they are not——?" said Yvonne, pointing in wonder to Belle's unpierced ears. Belle shook her head. "Oh, it must be done quickly! But now I regard you!" She stepped back and glanced shrewdly at the ensemble. "But you are beautiful, my dear!" she cried.

Belle smiled, but there was fear in her eyes. "You're a flatterer, Yvonne," she said, thinking of Johnny Waters with a heart that swelled with desire for the gowns.

"And now it is *necessairee* that you go to your mother," said Yvonne. "Come!"

Belle gasped. "No, no, Yvonne!" she gasped. "She would strike me, like as not!"

"Ah, no! It is *necessairee* that she see you!"

"No. I must take it off."

Yvonne came to her side, and talked and argued and gesticulated. "She will love you so!" she repeated again and again. "She will not know that it is you, Belle! Oh, yes, you must go!"

Belle stood in silence, her face darkening. "No," she said, half to herself. She glanced down at the beautiful dress, that was like a taste of paradise to the damned, and raised her hands to remove it. But the fumbling fingers stayed, and for a moment she stood still. Then, giving herself a hoydenish shake, as if she would brace herself for the scene, she marched out past Yvonne and hurried recklessly down the stairs.

Yvonne clapped her hands together, and laughed gleefully. She thought of Aunt Deborah's grim face softening at sight of Belle, and, perhaps, at the kindness of Yvonne. She tied the earrings into a tiny cardboard box, and was laboriously inscribing, in flourishing letters, "TO BELLE" upon the lid, when the stair-door opened, and she heard Aunt Deborah say: "Take it off, y' shameless madam! Never did I think to see y' dressed up like

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that, like the scarlet woman o' the Book!" The words were vibrantly irritating, and they seemed to fly up the stairs, electrifying Yvonne. Then came the sound of a door closing, and Belle's heavy steps on the stairs.

She entered the room, and put by Yvonne, who would have gone to her. She crossed over to the bedside, her face turned away from the candle-light, and her fingers began fumbling with the fastening of the gown. But, then, as if her spirit had suddenly fled, she slipped down at the bedside, and, deaf to all Yvonne's entreaties, her head bowed upon her hands, she sobbed in heart-broken fashion, like one who, coming parched from the desert, is turned back from the green oasis, unrefreshed and broken in spirit.

Yvonne knelt beside her, and twined her arms about her, beginning to glimpse the poor little tragedy of Belle's life. Belle would not hear her, would not find shelter and comfort in her arms, but sobbed on quietly, bitterly.

Then, so suddenly that Yvonne started in affright, she staggered up to her feet, her face distressfully flushed and swollen, and, almost screaming to Yvonne: "I *will* wear it!" she broke away from Yvonne's arms and ran down the stairs.

Yvonne bravely followed, and heard, as she stepped into the lamp-light of the kitchen, the beginning of the struggle.

"You shall do nothin' o' the 'sort!"

"I shall! I *will* wear it! I don't care tuppence for what you say! You've always med a fool o' me, keepin' me dowdy like as I was a scarecrow! It's *poor Belle Winterton, what's never dressed fit to be seen*, in the village! Oh, I know! But I won't be it any longer! No, I won't!"

Sylvester and Young Jack sat beside the table, their account books upon the red cloth. Both stared like statues.

"Y'll go back an' teck that devil's thing off this minute!" replied Aunt Deborah in a low, angry voice, the little nerve beside her grim mouth twitching like a

pulse. "I never did think to see *my* gel dressed so shameless! An' if y' was a year younger, me gel, I'd thrash y' within a ninch o' y' life for the way y've talked to me! *Honour thy father and mother*, says the Book, but by what I can see——!"

"I don't care what you see!" said poor Belle, her distressed, transfigured face turned fiercely towards her mother. "An' I'm too old for talk o' thrashin,' let me tell y'! Lay a finger on me like y' used to an' I'll go an' never come back, I will! I don't care what you say, I'm goin' to wear it! And I'm goin' to have my hair bobbed, *and* wear earrings and things, like other girls do! And you can't stop me!"

"Madame——?" began Yvonne, trembling as she stood between the pair.

"You teck it off this minute, unless y' want me to tear it off y' back!" repeated Aunt Deborah sternly.

"Oh, let her wear it, mother!" said Young Jack. "There's nothing the matter with it, as far as I can see. She looks a treat in it. . . . Let her wear it. Things have altered since your day."

"Yes, for the worse!" said Aunt Deborah, angered at Jack's interference.

"But you must admit she looks rippin', aunt!" said Sylvester.

"What's the matter with it?" asked Jack.

She stared from one to the other. "What's the matter with it? . . . Why, it isna what a gel what thinks anythin' about urself 'ud wear! It mecks ur look 'alf naked, shameful to the eye, that's what's the matter with it! What d'y think they'd say in the village if ur went out like that? You teck it off, afore there's worse comes on it!"

"I shan't! Not for you nor anybody else!"

"But, mother——!" began Young Jack.

"Then I'm done with it!" said Aunt Deborah, speaking in a beaten tone. "You go y'r own way. I never thought to see daughter o' mine flyin' in the face of all decency and right like what you've done! But y' can do what y' like now——!"

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"You'd keep me a scarecrow!" sobbed Belle.

"But, mother, it's a fuss about nothing!" said Young Jack, his heart aching for both mother and daughter.

"I'm done with it," she replied, seating herself heavily beside the table. And there was silence for some time, broken only by Gaffer's wheezing and Belle's sobbing.

The back door opened, and Farmer John came in from the moonlight. "Ello, everybody!" he began, and then stopped, staring and blinking and wheezing in the candle-light. His glance rested at last on Belle. "What's the matter?"

"Yvonne's given me a dress," sobbed Belle. "An' mother wants to keep me dressed like a gipsy wench all my life!"

"Dunna say no more," said Aunt Deborah bleakly, pulling at her lower lips. "I'm finished with it."

"Dear, dear," said Farmer John timidly.

"I'm old enough to know my own mind, and I'm going to dress myself how I think fit!" said Belle, and stalked off upstairs.

There was silence in the kitchen. Farmer John seated himself at the table. Yvonne, standing at the stair-foot, glanced indecisively from the stairs to Aunt Deborah, sitting so grim and lonely at the side of the table.

Yvonne came forward. "Madame——!" she began appealingly.

"That will do! Dunna talk to me!" said Aunt Deborah, her tiny, brilliant grey eyes flashing bitter anger at the girl.

"But, aunt, Yvonne meant no harm," said Sylvester quickly. "She did it in kindness."

"Yes, madame, *c'est ça!*" said Yvonne.

"I know," said Aunt Deborah. "I binna blamin' the gel over-much."

Yvonne bent and kissed her grim face. Aunt Deborah gave a brief nod. "Dunna worry, lass," she said shortly, her heart too heavy for more words.

Yvonne left them, Aunt Deborah glooming unhappily upon the fire, Granny Mary carrying in supper utensils,

Farmer John glancing furtively at their faces, and Gaffer sitting immobile, like a Chinese god—he had not even turned during the scene—in the ingle-nook.

Yellow lamp-light lay upon them, throwing black shadows behind their still forms, and the small fire in the grate whispered softly to the black cat who lay purring before it. The air was full of the sweet, sickening scent of Farmer John's asthma tobacco, which crackled slightly as it burned.

The peace that Belle and Yvonne had so rudely broken descended upon the room again.

But there was no peace in the heart of Aunt Deborah.

Green days had come, and golden days approached. The paired sycamore buds had appeared like pointed darts in apple-coloured sheaths, and down by the Abbey river, where ducks multiplied apace, as if they, too, had been white spring flowers, marsh mallow came to proffer with generous gesture her store of golden batons. Vegetation spread like sunlight after rain. And then came the honey-laden scent of wallflowers from the garden, and young, tender ferns and crab-apple blossom in the wood, where bluebells were just flowering, their masses still overcast by a sheen of wonderful pale green. And on Sunday afternoons Belle would take Yvonne to see a tree of yellow berberis, like mimosa, and the first beech fronds with their little silk flowers, and shepherd's purse and weedy fronds of pig-nut leaves and the satiny flowers of the wood-rush. And then, as June came in, sorrel reddened the meadows, where fog abode in the mornings, and heaps of manure steamed in the fog. And then came bowers of clustered lilac, and trefoil, and white cuckoo flowers, and the little lanes became garlanded in white with hemlock and hedge parsley and wild carrot. So summer approached, and the days grew steadily warmer, until one Sunday, walking with Belle and Johnny Waters in Bluebell Wood, Yvonne came out from beneath

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the trees, where bluebells were shimmering in a lilac haze, and felt the sun hot upon her cheek, so that for a moment she stood still, sighting Paris from afar.

And all this time Aunt Deborah and Belle lived upon different terms; unwittingly, Yvonne had severed the intimate relation between mother and daughter, and Belle had found emancipation. Aunt Deborah saw with silent anger, one day, that Belle's hair was cropped short about her neck, the hair that Aunt Deborah had tended and cherished since Belle was a tiny baby; and, again, upon the day of the fête Belle assumed the right to wear the pearl ear-rings, which were devil's baubles in her mother's eyes. Aunt Deborah did not comment. But she looked a little older, a little grimmer, as the months passed.

Nearer and nearer the days crept forward towards July, and Yvonne worked frenziedly about the house, finding no work, however mean and degrading, too degrading for her hands.

Like a belated traveller upon some foul night she thought nothing of the torments of the darkness and the rain, for was there not a light shining even through the rain from the far side of the bogged valley? In her dreams she saw the light shining through the blackness and the driving rain, the light of home, where lay warmth of fire and warmth of welcome, and friendly faces that were lit with happy smiles. . . .

In her dreams she saw the light, the light of Paris, and in her waking moments, as she went bedraggled about the house, it shone ever before her, brightening as the days moved on in their ordered beauty towards the glory of July.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE VILLAGE FÊTE

#### I

It was the day of the annual Crawford fête.

There were many people in Lovers' Lane as the young people of the farm strolled down to the village, for from all the little outlying hamlets the country folk were moving in upon the centre, all clad in their quaint country clothes, the women still wearing frugally the costume of Victoria's day. One might see leg-o'-mutton sleeves, and even suggestions of a bustle, and among the men old bowler hats and check suits and stocks and bell-bottomed trousers and unruly "dickies" and old fat umbrellas. They were a curious company to walk the green lanes in search of pleasure—uneducated, poor, prejudiced, ignorant of the world beyond Ruggenham, tied to their churches and chapels by long habit, and to their politics by fear, living relics of a bygone age. All cried their cheerful good mornings to the young people, and all opined that the day would be hot, with thunder about.

The village street was massed with country folk, and crowds—that seemed to work electrically upon Belle and Yvonne—were still pouring in. And soon came the procession. Yvonne, leaning out to see the great scene, with Marion Briscoe's present of tenderly pastelled delphiniums in her hand, their spicy scent in her nostrils, saw the middle ages walking again in Lincoln green, cross-gartered and with be-feathered hats, and the strange Horn Dancers, for whom the village is famous, capering about beneath their branching horns like grotesque, bewitched animals. At such times, with the sunlit thatched houses for a background, one might breathe the air of mediæval times, so closely had the costumes been copied,



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from father to son, down the ages. It was a brave show, and the country folks went along to the fête field, in Shooker's Lane, with the past tugging at their hearts.

Then the band began to play, and white tents billowed in the little breeze, and wonderful horses were being walked about the field, and the air was full of dialect and mordant wit. And there was Mrs. Briscoe and Sally Twitten to join the party, and there was Mr. Redfin, a bouquet of roses in his buttonhole, a cheap cigar beneath his enormous moustache, his shrill tongue criticizing the horses for the benefit of Aunt Deborah, his eye casting a jaundiced glance at the high jump. And there were old school chums who had left the village, who yet returned upon this day of memories to their tiny, forgotten birth-place, and stories were swapped and old times recalled. One of these exiles was noticed by Johnny, who called: "'Erb! 'Erb!'"

"There's 'Erb Boulger," he said to Jack and Sylvester, who seemed to prick up their ears at the news. The three young men spoke hurriedly together. Yvonne saw that they were looking at a big, awkward young man, with a great mouth, and very thick spectacles on his nose, and spats covering the tops of his big boots.

"'Erb!" called Johnny again, and Herbert Boulger strolled towards them, a fair, pretty, affected girl in black upon his arm.

"'Ow am y'?" asked Herb, posing magnificently before them in all the finery of his spats and pink tie and buckskin gloves. The old friends greeted him, and he was introduced, blushing, to Yvonne. He then introduced "my young lady, Miss Tavernor."

"I want to see you, on business, Herb," said Young Jack. "Could you call at the farm this evening?"

"Could we, Ethel?" he asked his young lady.

"Pleased, I'm sure," she said.

"Oh, they're catching the fowl!" cried Belle, and all the party hurried over to the tree from which a dead fowl was suspended by a string. The competitor was blindfolded, provided with a carving knife, turned round three times, and then bidden find the fowl, cut it down,

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and take it home. Price threepence a go. First Johnny had a go, then Yvonne, then Belle, then Miss Tavernor, and then 'Erb Boulger nearly cut Miss Twitten's head off, mistaking her befeathered hat for the fowl, and then Sally had a go at Sylvester's expense, and was detected with one eye uncovered at the very moment when her outstretched hand touched the fowl's wing, and then up came Mr. Twitten and had three goes, after which he measured his reach beneath the fowl, and demanded his money back.

So began the day of delight, and excitement sustained the party throughout the horse-leaping and the flat-races and the high jump and the obstacle race and the old women's race and the men's tug of war for a barrel of ale, while the sun shone and the band played, and all the world laughed at the dark imprisonment of the year.

### 2

At three o'clock, when the fun was at its height, there came a cool wind out of the south-west, where the Canford Chase shone blue in the distance, and on looking up from the horse-leaping finals Sylvester was alarmed to see a great black cloud creeping up from over Rug-genham in the south. He made haste to get Yvonne into the nearest refreshment tent—the rest of the party had scattered—and hardly had they been served with coffee and sandwiches when a sudden roll of thunder caused an universal gasp of dismay to rise from the crowded field. Soon the first drops of rain pattered down upon the tents, and the sunlight was blotted out as by a mighty hand, the air grew dark and chill, and then down came the rain in earnest, with roaring of thunder and flashing of lightning, so that the crowd scuttled for shelter, and Sylvester, and Yvonne were soon surrounded by a hundred laughing, shouting, grumbling country people.

Yvonne shuddered as a heavy clap of thunder sounded above the tent. "It will be very much rain, I think,"

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she said, drawing her cape about her in the draughty, noisy tent. "I wonder if it's raining in Paris."

"I should think not," he said in affected absent-mindedness.

"Four days only!" she said, her eyes sparkling. "In four days we see Paris! Or is it five, for it will take one day for the journey? I have written to Berthe that we shall be there on Sunday morning."

She caught his glance for a moment, a troubled, guilty glance that she had surprised in his eyes two or three times during the morning. And suddenly he in-breathed sharply, and said a curious thing. "Do you want to go back very much, Yvonne?"

She was startled, more by his manner than by his question. "But yes!" she said quickly. "And you, you too, of course! Oh, it will be as heaven!"

He gulped, and his gipsy face grew very pale in the darkening tent, above which the thunder roared and rain fell on a high treble note. She did not guess the black words he must say, he saw.

"Yvonne, my dear," he said at last, like a man in pain. "I don't think . . . I think we shall have to put off our trip on Saturday. It's impossible."

She was staring intently into his face.

"You mean . . . not go?"

"Yes."

She was very still. Suddenly she put a hand on his arm, and the villagers gaped at the bare beauty the cape disclosed. "You mean that we cannot go to Paris?" she asked in French. And when he nodded glumly she smiled. "Ah, you jest, Sylvie, of course!" She laughed, but as his face still remained set and serious the laughter died from her beautiful face. In general his humour was too shallow to continue so long, for he was a serious young man. "But, Sylvie——" she began in sudden dismay.

"I ought to have told you before . . . or warned you," he said, moistening dry lips. "But I thought I should manage to scrape the money together in time."

"But why? It is the money?"

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"Yes."

"But the ducks? You say that they prosper?"

He nodded miserably. "Yes, but just at the moment all our money is in stock, ducks and pens and things. And now Jack wants to take this shop. We tried to get one in Ruggenham, but couldn't, and even if there is one in Hendiford we haven't the money to take it yet. Perhaps in September. . . . But to take you to Paris now I should have to ask Jack to sell off stock, and that would ruin the business. And I can't ask Jack to do that. I've treated him too badly as it is."

"But you can borrow the money, as we did on the Hill, surely?"

"No." He thought of Aunt Deborah's ban on borrowing. Granny Phyllis would lend the money, but in Aunt Deborah's eyes it would be a betrayal of the family. This was the chief consideration; but there was, too, the madness of borrowing money when he was penniless, and when their future happiness and comfort, and the happiness and comfort of all the people at the farm, were in the balance.

"Then . . . we cannot go?" she asked again, with a face like death.

He shook his head, hardly daring to speak.

She sat stunned and broken by the denial.

"Oh!" she said, suddenly rising as the bitterness of the blow reached her. The country folks stared. "Oh, it is not true, Sylvie! You would not——!" she began in French. She saw that his gipsy lips twitched with pain, and at the sight, with a muffled sob, she pressed unheeding through the crowd, that was hanging intently upon the scene, and went out into the storm, her handkerchief to her mouth.

For a moment he sat in pallid despair, his heart aching for her in her pain, unheeding the stares of his countrymen. (The scene was discussed at many a farm fire that night, and many and various were the constructions put upon it.) Then, as the thunder rocketed across the world outside, he started up and hurried out after her.

In the pouring rain and the yellow stormlight he met

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Johnny Waters, who shone like a drenched, bedraggled peacock.

"Belle's took ur 'ome," said Johnny. There were runnels of water beside his open mouth and rabbit teeth. "Ur told me to tell y'! What's up?"

As they hurried out into the lane Sylvester, who had no desire to give explanations, told him that she had a head-ache. They strode through the swimming, deserted village, where flashes of sheet-lightning were reflected in ghostly fashion from the dead windows, and in the great puddles at their feet dark yellow clouds, lit by unearthly lights, were reflected, so that the sky above and the earth beneath seemed to be one moving panorama of bilious clouds and hissing rain and black shadows, lit again and again by lightning that shone like the blue flashing of a gigantic, incandescent sword wielded by arch-fiends.

"She will be ill after this!" muttered Sylvester again and again in exasperated despair. Johnny made comforting noises. Soon they reached the farm, whose white-washed front shone out in ghostly, almost luminous pallor against the dark sky and the driving storm.

The kitchen looked like a cosy heaven, with its red firelight and dry floor. Aunt Deborah met him on the threshold.

"Granny's put ur to bed," she said. "What's gone wrong wi' the little lass?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," he said, throwing off his coat and hat and hastening over to the stairs. Granny Mary, with a basin of untouched soup, met him at the stair-foot.

"Ur's feelin' better now, poor lassie!" she said. "But ur did go on at first! Ur wanted to go back to ur own land badly, poor lass!"

"Why——?" began Aunt Deborah, but he hurried away, leaving Granny Mary to explain.

Yvonne was lying face downwards on the bed, while Belle bent over her, talking softly. For a moment a wild nightmare thought took frenzied hold of his mind—that she was dead.

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Hearing his step, Belle rose and whispered to him :  
"I think she's gone to sleep. 'Sh!"

"No," he whispered unhappily. "Johnny is down below, wet through. Find him some of my clothes."

When he was alone with her in the dark little room, whose single candle made a tiny yellow oasis about the bed, he strode over to her. "Yvonne!" he said in a hoarse whisper, and knelt beside her. They had undressed her, thank God, he thought. She moved, but did not speak. "Yvonne, *chérie!*"

"No, do not speak to me!" she said in French. "I love you not, no, nor ever will! . . . Oh!" And deep sobs shook her.

"Yvonne, my dear, I can't tell you how sorry I am! I didn't know you were so set on going back! . . . Yes, I did, but I couldn't get the money, no matter how hard I tried, and I can't be a rotter to Jack again! Oh, my darling, don't think too badly of me!"

And suddenly, with a fierce movement that startled him, she sat up in bed. "And do you not imagine what it means to me, this slaving like an unpaid *bonne*, this paddling about in all the filth for this Aunt Deborah of yours, and then you refuse to take me back to Paris, even for a week? . . . You said to me that if I found that I could not live here, that I was unhappy here, you would take me back! . . . I ask it not! I ask not to spoil your work here and the work of Jack! I ask but to go back for a short week, to see Paris and Berthe and all of them"—tears blinded her—"and then I would return to this house, and to all the horror of my life here for your sake! And you refuse me! No, do not touch me! I hate you! *Hate* you! I don't love you any more! Oh, my God, save me, save me!"

And she cast herself down with abandon upon the bed, nor would she allow him to touch her or to speak to her, while great sobs shook her slender body.

So they remained for twenty minutes, while the rain sang a derisive dirge upon the windows and the thunder roared above the wet hollow. At each attempt he made to speak she checked him. Never had he seen such wild

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grief, that in an English girl might have seemed ridiculous. But, loving her as he did, he could understand to the full, and his heart, that had once ached only for his own selfish griefs, was now torn for her. So much had her love done for him. And she lay sobbing in anguished despair: so much had his love done for her.

When she grew calmer, and he did not speak, she began to speak again. "It is not that I do not love you," she said. "If that were true, I would go, and never would I come back! It is that I love you that chains me, and, oh, *mon Dieu!* . . . How I wish that I did not love you, for to what end has your love of me and my love of you brought me! Ah, you do not understand, the English do not understand, this need I have of Paris and of my country and my friends! You see not Paris as I see it, you do not desire it as a child desires its mother! . . . You know not what is beauty here, nor good fellowship, nor intimacy of heart! You are cold, too cold, and too cruel, you live unhappily, like condemned people, you do not live and love and enjoy life and be happy! No, you mourn ever! You quarrel unceasingly! You are prejudiced and stupid! You wear dark faces and speak covertly, behind one's back! You live but to work and to quarrel! Ah, I do not love England or the English, and I wish that I did not love you! I know not what devil put it into my heart to love you!"

He listened to the indictments with a heart of lead, for they confirmed what had been only fears before. It was like hearing the death sentence, past which there is no hope.

"Oh, my darling!" he said hoarsely. "If only I'd known that it would be like this——!"

"*Parles Français!*" she said brusquely, rudely, her dark, beautiful face sullen as the sky outside.

"If I had but known this that I now know, Yvonne, I would not have brought you!" he said. "I thought that we might be happy, that after a time you would get used to the country and the life here, or that I might make enough money to take you back and give me a start in Paris! I meant you to be happy, and I would rather

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be dead than see you unhappy, or, worse still, live to see you dead!"

"I wish that I were!" she said; but the irritant note of anger had gone from her voice, for his tongue, stumbling along so pitifully, at her behests, in French, had touched her heart, who still loved him. "But, *mon Dieu*, I wish that I were!"

"Yvonne!" he muttered, in the very pit of misery.

His head, the black curls lying all awry, was bent over her hands, and for some time they were silent, his face working, she staring out, sullenly white, upon the little dark room and the dancing candle shadows, while outside the thunder passed and rain descended upon a sustained, vigorous note.

And then, suddenly, he was shocked to feel her cheek pressed to his, and scalding tears falling upon his face, while her quivering lips sought his. "Sylvie!" she said, and there was more heart-rending reproach in the tenderness of the word than in all that she had said before.

He clasped her to him as if she had come back from hell's gates to his arms. "Oh, Yvonne! Yvonne!" he cried, his heart torn with the pain of his love.

And again they were silent for a long time, while the sound of the rain descended from a high treble to a low murmur, and at last grew silent, when the air was filled with the refreshing sound of running water. The storm was over.

He kissed her, and she returned his kiss. "Forgive me for this that I said," she whispered brokenly. "I love you, and I could not hate you. . . . I know that you would not be cruel to me if you could prevent it, my dear."

"I love you, Yvonne, and there is nothing to forgive. Yet I cannot forgive myself for ever bringing you here. That was the great mistake. Oh, Yvonne, if I could only make it up to you!" he said.

"Speak not of it," she said, and their lips met in a long kiss that told more, in the pitiful understanding of love, than words could tell. As their lips withdrew his lids smarted with unshed tears.



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She gave his sallow cheek a little tender tap. "I think you would have been happier with this Mees Marion, Sylvie, my dear," she whispered sadly. "I did not mean to hurt you so."

And so nearly did she echo his thoughts that he could not find words to answer her. In that moment he first knew the terror and the delight of the humility of love. The old Sylvester Dawe of the selfish heart, who had been dying so long, now died in that moment, and the new Sylvester Dawe, whom the love of Yvonne had freed from the close prison of himself, now knelt before her.

The candle had guttered out long ago, and now a wan shaft of moonlight fell upon the bed, illuminating for a moment her pallid face and twisted smile and wonderful dark hair, while his own gipsy head was turned upwards to her, the red lips speaking passionately of love. And ever and again she answered his words with a kiss and a subdued, murmured endearment.

### 3

She would not descend for supper, so he left her, promising to send up a cup of tea, which was all she wanted, she said, thinking with grief of the red wine of France.

Aunt Deborah stood at the stair-foot. At the table Johnny and Belle and Young Jack and Herb Boulger and his young lady supped. Miss Twitten sat beside the fire eating a bowl of soup, her ears cocked to miss no word of the talk about the taking of a shop at Hendiford.

All turned as he entered, and he was besieged with questions about Yvonne's condition.\*

"She's feeling better now," he said.

"Come an' 'ave some supper, lad," said Granny Mary, searching his pale face anxiously. "You look as if you could do wi' summat."

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"What's all this about France?" asked Aunt Deborah bluntly, as he took his seat beside Belle.

The sound of her vibrant voice irritated him in his highly nervous state. "We'd arranged to have a trip over to Paris at the end of the week," he said reluctantly.

"Was that the reason——?" began Miss Twitten.

But he cut her short. "Mind your own business!" he said rudely, and everybody moved in alarm. They had never seen him like this. Poor Sally began to whimper. Belle grinned at Johnny with exquisite enjoyment of the reply.

"I expect y' mean that for me, too!" said Aunt Deborah harshly. "But it's my business to look after that little lass as y' was daft enough to bring out on ur own country, to meck a fool on ur by promisin' to teck ur back, when y'know . . . when y'know it's impossible."

"Look here, Sylvie," said Young Jack, "if that's what has upset Yvonne, you be sensible and let me sell off enough stock to take her."

"You'll do nothin' o' the sort, not while I'm 'ere!" said his mother, the little nerve beside her mouth beginning to move. She turned her brilliant grey eyes on her son. "Of all the daft talk——!" she ended wrathfully.

"If Sylvie will take her, I'll sell the stock to-morrow!" said Young Jack warmly.

"No, Jack," he interrupted. "It's impossible to take money off the farm. And you must try to understand, aunt, that I didn't promise to take Yvonne, knowing that I couldn't. I was a fool, I know, but when I saw that the ducks were doing well I thought I might be able to do it. . . . I promised to take her before we were married."

"'Ow much would y' want?" asked Johnny diffidently.

"Oh, twenty at least. Why?"

"Well, I got seven pound an' a push bike I dunna want——" began Johnny.

"No, thanks. Thanks, Johnny. She's promised to wait until Christmas."

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"An' very wise on ur, too," said Aunt Deborah in relief. "Though what ur wants to go back for at all licks me. A wife's place is with ur 'usband, meckin' money, not spendin' it!"

"Ah well, it's settled now, poor lass," said Granny Mary, turning at the stair-foot with a cup of tea in her hands. "I'll just go an' see 'ow ur's doin'."

Sylvester ate his supper in silence, his mind still taut with the day's happening. *That*, then, was the mistake he had made, in the very beginning. He should not have brought Yvonne to England. They should never have been married. It was exquisite cruelty to keep her here. Perhaps this duck-farm? If only he could get enough money to take them to France and give him a start in some job, he would take her and never return to England. Oh, it was a mad marriage, whichever way you looked at it! Why was it he had never thought of it before? He must have been blind to have loved Yvonne and pleaded with her to marry him. The memory of her weeping reluctance to come to England stabbed him. Oh, he had been a fool, or worse! Blindly he had loved, blindly he had married, and blindly he had brought her to this hole to live. He was amazed at his own blindness. And it was *she* who had to suffer, Yvonne, for whom he would have gladly died. . . . Yet, loving her as he did in Paris, he could not have given her up. And he could not have earned a living in France. . . . He ought never to have gone there, he thought bitterly. But then there would have been no Yvonne.

He heard Herb Boulger and Jack and Johnny Waters speak about a shop that would be vacant in September in Hendiford, and he gave his consent to the proposal of taking it, yet still like one in a dream. In the same way he said good night to the visitors, and sat on glooming at the table until Farmer John came in looking suspiciously merry, and sat down to supper.

He must be doubly solicitous of her happiness, he saw. He must guard her from the tongue and the prejudice of Aunt Deborah, and frequently he must take her out of the dark house to break the nervous spell of the place

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upon her. And at Christmas she should not again be disappointed. He would make sure of that.

It was not a place to which to bring such as Yvonne, he thought, glancing about the dark little kitchen, with its paraffin lamp upon the red cloth behind the supper utensils on the table, its dead grandfather clock, its sombre cupboards and few pictures and low ceiling, and its blatant "GOD IS LOVE" above the fireplace. Gaffer Johnny dozed wheezily in the ingle-nook, his mind behind the red face and raying fringe of hair going back to one knows not what bright day of the past. Aunt Deborah sat opposite, the Family Bible on her knee, her grim lips moving, a memory of the scene in the dour curve of her mouth; sometimes she tugged at her lower lip, or rubbed irritably at the mole in the crack beside her great nose, while all the time her long, thin, red, calloused finger ran flatly across the text, as if it were flattening out the word of God. And beside the table Farmer John sat corpulently, his asthma pipe reeking and crackling and sizzling, his one fat, red hand stroking his tow-coloured side-whiskers meditatively, his thin, gaitered legs tucked up beneath his chair, the wind whistling in his nose as he inhaled the smoke from his pipe. No, it was decidedly not the place to bring his little madcap from Montmartre. Oh, why had he been such a selfish fool?

The black cat rolled over upon its back. The fire spluttered. Gaffer wheezed. A faint hissing came from the paraffin lamp, a faint sizzling from Farmer's pipe. And upstairs, with the moonlight upon her, lay Yvonne, her heart sore with longing for France. He would go to her. . . .

## CHAPTER XX

### AN AUGUST EVENING

JOHNNY and Belle walked down Lovers' Lane. The road was wet, shining whitely in the moonlight, and in the air was the scent of wet hay. "The devil's in the moon for mischief," wrote the poet, and upon this night Johnny was certainly moonstruck. For, although he and Belle had spooned, like all other Crawford couples, Johnny had not made his formal declaration, without which he had no significance. And he was now a young man with prospects, for it seemed as if nothing could go wrong upon the duck-farm, as if the god of luck had sided with them ever since they had begun the venture. And Belle looked so sweet in the russet gown, the moonlight throwing soft lights and shadows about her plump face. Should he? He gulped.

"What's gone wrong with *you*?" asked Belle, after they had strolled down as far as the bridge.

"Me?"

"Yes. You're going along as if you had the tummy-ache."

"Well, blime, I dunno 'ow y' guessed that, Belle!" he said. "Fact is, I 'ave got a bit of a pain thereabouts."

She looked startled. "Do you mean it?"

"Course. . . . Shall we 'ave a fiver on the bridge?"

"It's wet."

"Not when I put my mack on it like that. . . . Come on."

"I mustn't stay here long, Johnny. Nor you, if you're feeling like that. You've probably caught cold."

Johnny passed his arm about her waist, and leaned his head against hers. "I'm feelin' better now," he said. "Y' know, Belle. . . ."

## *An August Evening*

"Yes?"

"It's wonderful 'ow nice the moon is after the rain, don't y' think?"

"Yes, lovely."

He bent and kissed her, and vulgarly smacked his lips over the draught. "You know, Belle, I think as 'ow you got the nicest mouth in the world," he said.

"You've told me that before."

"'Ave I? That's funny. It only just struck me." And he began to whistle "*Abe, my boy*."

She glanced at him queerly. "You sure it's the only thing that's struck you," she asked cryptically.

"Eh? What? Struck me? . . . Oh, ah! . . . Haw! Haw! . . . You know, jokin' apart, I do feel bad to-night."

"I've already told you, you ought to be in bed," she said. "You must go. I don't think you ought to be out if you're feeling bad." She jumped down from the bridge. "Come along. Let's——"

"No, it ain't that!" he said, clutching her frenziedly. "No, not tummy-ache. Come here. Jump up!" He put his arm about her again. "Guess."

"I can't guess, Johnny," she said, in a puzzled voice. "What d'you mean?"

"Me 'eart," he said, and whistled a few bars of his ribald song.

"D'you mean——?" began poor Belle, a flush creeping up into her plump cheeks.

He looked down at her face, so fair in the moonlight, and his heart played syncopated music at the wonderful sight. He sighed, and gazed at her with melancholy languor. "Yes," he said.

They were silent, and then both sighed together. Poor Belle waited, but Johnny made no move to consolidate his position. A white moth fluttered before them.

"You're joking," she said at last.

He stared, his rabbit teeth shining. "No, Belle, I ain't!" he said earnestly. "Y' know, Belle, since we bin walkin' out I bin wantin' to tell y' that . . . well, I believe as 'ow . . . I meantersay it strikes me that——"

## *The Golden Milestone*

"What, Johnny?"

He bent nearer. "I think as 'ow I'm in love with y', Belle," he said gloomily. He looked like a female in an interesting condition.

Belle stood very still and white in the moonlight. "Yes," she said, her heart throbbing.

But Johnny said nothing for a time, so overcome was he by the emotions of the moment.

"Yes," he said at last.

Then they sighed again, and stared out upon the Abbey river, where dimly through the gloom beneath the trees water-hens swam about, and rats slipped into the water with a quiet "plop." Belle's heart was ready to burst for joy, and only one thing was necessary to crown the night's delight. But Johnny still waited.

"Are you sure, Johnny?" she asked, in a choked voice.

"Yes," he said again. "I bin gettin' surer every time I see y'. . . . An' now I'm certain. Kiss me!" They kissed. And then, feeling more uncomfortable and yet more exhilarated than he had ever done before, he said: "Good night, darlin'. . . . See y' to-morrow. Think o' me before y' go to sleep, won't y'?"

"Yes," said poor Belle, faintly.

They kissed again, and then Johnny raised his velour and strode off with his head in the air and his heart racing madly. For had he not said The Words?

It was not until he had breasted the hill that a sudden memory brought his light feet to a standstill, and in a moment he was running back, calling through the night: "Belle! Belle! I say, Belle!" And to himself: "Dammit! What a chap I am!"

She had not gone far. She seemed to look at him queerly, he saw with a groan. . . .

"Oh, by the way, there's one thing——!" he gasped.

"Yes?" she said. She seemed very cool.

"I forgot to ask y' whether—if you—liked me like that?"

"Like what?" she asked cruelly.

Poor Johnny perspired. "Like what I do you," he said.

## *An August Evening*

"It doesn't seem a very important thing, does it?" she asked calmly.

He stared in affright, his dream-castle swaying. Then he pulled her to him and kissed her fiercely. "Y'know as it does matter, more'n all!" he said. "Cuss me, but I am a fewl!"

And then she took pity on him, and whispered her love, and when they finally parted he was well content.

And listening at the back door of the farm the tiny night wind carried to her ears scraps of melody from the lips of Johnny Waters, making his way back to the village with a heart over-flowing with love.



## CHAPTER XXI

### "COME TO THE FAIR "

#### I

It was a warm September evening, and the fields and woods about the village were possessed of the calm, eternal beauty of September dusk, when the last lights lay in long, pale loveliness across the greensward and the edges of the woods, and shadows crept moistly from their hiding-places to summon the little brown rabbits from their burrows and the fox from his woody retreat. The rooks were holding evening service on the Ruggenham Road, and in the hedges the birds were composing themselves to their dewy slumber.

But in the village there were lights and laughter and a disposition to shout above the grinding music of the roundabout organ. For it was the annual Crawford Fair, that followed ten weeks after the fête, and upon the green there were wheeling lights and grotesque shadows, painted heraldic horses dancing upon the ends of glittering brass bars, an ever-moving, shouting, singing, laughing crowd of country folk, and all the fun of the fair. Ragged men roared hoarsely to the crowd to Have a Go and Chancet y'Luck, to Knock the Kaiser's Head Orf at Three for a Penny, urging custom by such persuasive items of wisdom as that if you didn't Speculate you would never Accumulate, that Time was Short, and Tomorrow y'Would not Have the Chanct, and that All the Ladies love a Sport. Others informed the crowd that it was both amusing and instructing and epoch-making to view the Human Pigmy and the Spotted Lady from North Borneo, that Every One was Guaranteed Milky Three for Sixpence, and that if you would know the future the Silver Queen of the Gipsies was willing to gratify your wish at the price of Threepence a Go, with a Description

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of your Future Husband thrown in. And there were occasional disputes between showmen and countrymen, in which blunt dialect was unsuccessfully opposed to trenchant city wit. The dark, thatched cottages looked out as if in silent scorn of the hectic crowd and the tawdry colours and flaring naphtha lamps, and a forgotten moon rose up to add her austere light to the scene.

Before the coconut shy you might see Johnny Waters spending recklessly in order to win coconuts for Yvonne and Belle and Marion Briscoe; and over by the corner of the Goat's Head Sally Twitten, seated with her hands in the hands of the Silver Queen, listening with an awed, amazed look to the future that was to be hers; or Young Jack making wholesale slaughter of the bottles for the girls' amusement; and Yvonne and Belle dancing and seesawing upon the wooden horses, their faces beaming and gurgling delight, their smart gowns flying in the wind, while Johnny Waters stood protectingly behind the pair, his hands rising and falling upon the wooden flanks of their horses; or Mr. Redfin hoopla-ing a toy tin drum and trying to look modest after the feat. Sylvester was away at Hendiford, viewing the shop that 'Erb Boulger, the exiled Crawfordian, had found, and the young people of the Manor Farm were enjoying themselves to the full, as far as their limited purses would allow. For the long weeks of imprisonment in the dark, damp farmhouse made the Fair seem like a dear glimpse of the gaiety of the world without. Yvonne was transfigured; she had been working stolidly, and with more success, during the week since the fête, her mind ever upon Paris at Noël, and the Fair seemed like a wonderful promise of the delights of Montmartre. She threw at coconuts, she rode deliriously upon the roundabouts, and she laughed and stammered with delight at the Spotted Lady and the rest of the atrocities, like one nervous after a fright. She had thought happiness so far away; she had counted up the months, the weeks, the days to Christmas, and then the gods, as if in pity, had cast her this crumb of pleasure, that seemed a very loaf, upon which she feasted with ravenous delight. And Belle, too, in her russet silk

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gown, enjoyed all the poor little delights of the Fair, as a released prisoner might enjoy a stretching ramble across the downs.

The Crawford Fair was a red-letter day in the black and grey calendar of the farmer's year.

### 2

Aunt Deborah sat with Gaffer Johnny in the living-room of the farm, her thin, red fingers flitting about her crochet work, her grim face lit by the candle-light. She was dressed in her Sunday best, and the house was silent and spotless. Her scattered thoughts ranged from the ear-rings that Belle now wore to the harvest that should have been carried and under thatch by this time, but something had gone wrong with the rack and crotch reaper, and the young men were occupied too much with the successful new venture to pay much heed to the harvesting, that had once been the crown of the year. And now this Fair, that had always been a thorn in Aunt Deborah's side. In their youth Sylvie and Young Jack had been forbidden the heady delights of the Fair, and this was the first year that Belle had been allowed to go; rather, she had announced that she was going. Aunt Deborah's brow grew dark as she thought of it. It was one more indictment against Yvonne. And finally Aunt Deborah's thoughts settled upon Sylvester's wife, as they had a way of doing in these days. . . . She was becoming more tractable, she had ceased smoking and drinking, and her work in the house was approaching satisfaction. . . . That linen she had ironed last night . . . it was beyond censure. And hadn't *she* (Aunt Deborah) been wise to get the girl to work? Wasn't it so much to her account that Sylvester would now have a wife who would be useful as well as ornamental? Not that she was ornamental in *her* (Aunt Deborah's) eyes. . . . No. Too fast, for one thing. . . . The way she had of throwing her legs about . . . twice Aunt Deborah had glimpsed her knees. . . . It was a disgrace to any Christian home. . . . And

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powdering her face. But she did it in secret, since Aunt Deborah had told her about it. . . . Deceitful! . . . As if she thought people couldn't tell when there'd been powder put on, thick, like that! . . . And had the cheek to tell Sylvester that it was the food that made it necessary! Oh, yes, she had not thought Aunt Deborah had been listening. She silently snorted, and stayed her busy fingers to rub scornfully the mole in the crack beside her nose. . . . But things had eased remarkably. She (Aunt Deborah) had wondered if there might be friction in those first months of Yvonne's coming, but there had been nothing to talk about. . . . And Aunt Deborah disliked friction. If only this duck farm would prosper, and Young Jack and Farmer would keep off the beer, and there had never been any Yvonne to break the home up and alienate her from Belle, aunt would be happy. But things would be all right now, she thought. It had been hard to tolerate the goings on of Yvonne and Belle's revolt, but things would be easier now. One had to give way many times when the spirit said fight, but one had had to give way to so many abuses in life, and especially since the war. It was only necessary to keep one's duty untouched by these changes, and try to keep the love of God in one's heart.

But as she reached this comforting thought there was a sound of hurried feet upon the drive, the clang of the gate, and a knocking at the door. Aunt rose, and in some trepidation went to the door. . . . Young Jack and the beer? Sylvester thrown off that combination?

It was Miss Twitten, her flowered hat awry, her haggard face white with excitement.

"Oh!" she said with a dismayed, outward motion of the hand. "Oh, thank God I've got 'ere!"

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Aunt Deborah, following her gossip into the living-room.

Sally collapsed upon Aunt Deborah's arm-chair. "Oh, dear me, that I should ha' lived to see such a thing!"

"There, get y' breath!" said Aunt Deborah, thinking of assault and robbery. What was the world coming to?

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Miss Twitten gradually recovered from a seeming swoon. "I 'ad to come!" she began. "It's my duty, whatever anybody says, as a Christian woman an' aspirin' to the Elect. . . . Down there. . . . At the Fair. Yvonne an' Belle an' the rest!"

"Why, what is it?" asked Aunt Deborah fearfully. "Speak out!"

"Why, goin' on shameful, they are!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Why, they've all gone mad, I think. Racin' about an' ridin' on the 'osses an' showing' their legs on the roundabouts an' swings . . . !" Sally covered her hard face. "Oh, all the village's talkin' about ur. They say ur ought to be ducked, an' it's little less than the truth. Got three chaps after ur, ur 'as, an' sittin' close together thick as thieves on the swings, an' straddlin' . . . *straddlin'!*" (her voice dropped to a whisper) . . . "the 'osses an' roundabouts, an' walkin' with the chaps' arms round ur, an' ur 'usband away. Shameful!"

Aunt Deborah stood like a graven image, and Granny Phyllis was in the room before she could turn. Upon the skinny face was a look of grim laughter. Aunt Deborah stared.

"There!" said Granny Phyllis, grinning hideously at them. "I'll show you whether I'm ready for screwin' down, our Deb!"

"Why, mother?" began Aunt Deborah in alarm, and almost forgettin' g Sally's horrible news. "'Ow 'ave you come?"

"Well, if you want to know, that twopenny-worth o' mischief that calls 'imself my son-in-law 'ad business in the town, so I got 'im to bring me as far as the village, an' I *walked* up! An' what's more, I'll *walk* back!"

"But, mother——!" protested Aunt Deborah.

"Yes, I know you're like the rest of 'em, our Deb, thinkin' we old-uns ought to be packed up decent. . . . Like 'taters! . . . But I'll be pokin' my nose into y' business twenty years after you're all gone to glory or the bonfire!" she said vigorously, taking a seat. "But what's Sally lookin' so down about? Kidneys again?"

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"No, I thank you, they're not too troublesome at present, tho' tender," said Miss Twitten with dignity.

Aunt Deborah briefly outlined the news, her hard face turning angrily from side to side, her brilliant grey eyes flashing in the candle-light.

"Yes, an' ur was playin' kiss-in-the-ring with all the chaps from Ruggen'am an' about!" added Miss Twitten defiantly.

"The shameless hussy!" muttered Aunt Deborah, standing very still, as if she were imagining the scene. "Are they comin' back?"

"I'm sure I dunno, Mrs. Winterton!" said Miss Twitten in a shocked whisper.

"An' what about our Belle?"

"Well, to tell y' the truth, Belle's pretty near as bad as ur, but certainly not quite, 'avin' bin brought up proper!" She turned in alarm as Granny Phyllis snorted. "But I dunna care what anybody says, I seed one o' the Ruggen'am chaps payin' for ur to throw at the cokernuts, I did! An' the crowd all looking' on shameful!"

"That'll do," said Aunt Deborah in her vibrant, irritating tone. "Will you go down an' tell them to come back at once, Sally? . . . Say that they are to come back at——"

"What're y' talkin' about, our Deb!" cried Granny Phyllis scornfully. "You'd spoil their night's outin' for the sake o' what Sally tells y'? You're daft!"

"Well, I must say——!" began Sally tearfully.

"Don't talk so foolish as usual!" said Aunt Deborah angrily, all her own and her late father's wrath at the laxity of Granny Phyllis in her voice. "I'd go down myself, Sally, but I'd rather not be seen with ur. . . . Lord, but it's 'ard that a Christian 'ouse should be troubled an' tormented like this, an' Belle med a byword on in this fashion by one who's no right to be 'ere at all!"

"H'm!" snorted Granny Phyllis. "Don't you be such a fool, our Deb! What if Yvonne is showin' ur

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legs. It's a better leg than either you or Sally Twitten could show!"

"Oh, Mrs. Lacy——!" began shocked Miss Twitten.

"I dunno why you talk like that!" said Aunt Deborah angrily. "It's no jokin' matter, let me tell you! Why, the village'll be all up in arms about it! I shall be ashamed to show my face in chapel!"

"I'd rather show me legs in public than me face in chapel!" said Granny Phyllis incorrigibly. "But as I'm not wanted I'll go!"

But Aunt Deborah would not part with her mother in anger; she did not like to see the sun go down upon her wrath. "I dunno want to offend y', as you know, mother. But you talk so foolish about things like this, things what'll bring me into my grave before my time!" And turning to Sally: "Go right away, Sally, do," and Sally departed.

"I'm sure I dunno what devil's spirit's in the wench to meck ur like a stumblin'-block to my feet!" muttered Aunt Deborah, taking Sally's chair.

"Fiddlesticks!" said the little old lady. "You dunna want to worry about 'em. Sally's a soft fool, an' a mischief-meckin' busybody at that. . . . An' I wisht I'd remembered to tell ur so afore ur went," she ended regretfully.

Aunt Deborah was silent, and little old mother and big grim daughter sat in silence for a time, while Gaffer wheezed on, remote as a mountain. . . . 'Im away in Hendiford, an' ur, the fast cat, disgracin' 'im down there! . . . It was past gettin' over! . . . The patience o' Job? . . . H'm! . . . 'Ow could you show patience an' lovin' kindness, as she so earnestly desired, to one who was wreckin' the 'ome up, demoralizin' the family, meckin' 'em as bad as 'erself? . . . And Belle would be as bad, if ur wasn't so already, with ur shameful dressin' an' disgustin' bobbed 'air an' jewellery! . . . Lord, why should they be dragged down by this painted harlot, this loose Philistine woman? . . .

"You know, our Deb, you're a bigger fool than I

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took you for," said Granny Phyllis at last. She had been watching Aunt Deborah's face intently.

"What d'you mean?" asked Aunt Deborah, in no mood for conversation.

"Why, about this gel, Yvonne. An' about this daughter o' yours. You 'ear a tale from the awfullest liar an' tell-tale in the village, bar me, an' you go right off into a fit, without stoppin' to find out whether there's any truth in it."

"I wisht to God there wasn't!"

"You talk a lot about God an' so forth an' fifth, an' yet at the first whisper . . . p'raps we'd better call it squeal . . . about your own daughter an' that little lonely lass Yvonne you're ready to cast 'em into 'ell-fire brimstone. It says somewher in the Bible 'Be long-sufferin',' but you don't try to be!"

"That's all *you* know! My life's one long trial with my mouth shut, these days."

Granny Phyllis looked at her, and when she replied her vigorous old voice was kindly lowered. "Yes, I know you do, Deb, my dear," she said. "An' you think *I* dunna see it. But I do. . . . Oh, I know what a trial the gel's bin to you, an' I know what a kindly woman you'd be if you'd let y'self, *an'* 'ow y' try to be patient. But what's wrong wi' you, our Deb, is too much chapel. You'd be a much nicer woman if you'd never bin inside one. Course, I know there's other things, too," she ended kindly.

"You're talkin' foolish," said Aunt Deborah in a low voice.

Granny sighed. "Nothin' will ever alter y', our Deb, I can see. You'll go on burnin' y' 'eart out over these things, an' it's too late to save y'. . . . Why not try to be 'appy with the little wench, an' not be so ready to believe evil of ur an' of y' own daughter? Seems to me as you chapel folk, an' church folk for that matter, are more frightened o' what the congregation thinks than what God 'Imself thinks. . . . Why not stop all this worryin' about ur an' about the farm an' about Farmer and Young Jack an' the beer an' all the rest on it, an'



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enj'y y' life? But I can see it's no use. . . . 'Owever, I come 'ere to tell you the awful news! "

Aunt Deborah glanced sombrely across.

"Why, what is it?" she said uneasily, the ever-present fear of life's knocks shaking her.

"Oh, dunna alarm y'self. But the worst 'as 'ap-pened!" She closed her old toothless mouth with a snap and stood stiffly dramatic before Aunt Deborah. "There's a 'stranger in the 'ouse! "

Unconsciously Aunt Deborah glanced round at the living-room. "What?" she said.

"A stranger."

"You don't mean——?"

"Yes. This mornin'. At four-fifteen, an' me nappin' at the time. . . . A b'y!"

Aunt Deborah stiffened. "Not Martha?" she said incredulously.

"Yes. I've always looked forward to see what sort o' thing they'd produce, an' now I'm satisfied. An' that little twopennorth—that little idiot who wants to meck believe 'e's the father on it is goin' about like mad about it, like as if 'e'd 'atched a giraffe or summat. . . . Why, you'd never believe it! . . . It was *my babby* this an' *my babby* that. . . . *Let's gi'e it a nuss.* . . ." Her voice shrilled up into a comical imitation of Mr. Redfin's falsetto. "*It's my babby, an' I'm goin' to nuss it.* . . . 'E wanted me to let 'im bring it 'ere to-night, 'cause we'd got to come into the village, not twenty hours after birth! . . . '*Gi'e un to me,*' he says. '*I ain't ashamed o' my babby.* . . . (*Is babby.*) . . . *You put a blanket round 'im, an' I'll teck 'im to Crowmarsh,*' 'e says. '*Is daddy ain't ashamed on 'im.*' An' 'e wanted to gi'e the brat a paper o' fish an' chips! "

Aunt Deborah snorted. "The fool," she said. "I'll come along. You'll be needin' me. Won't you 'ave a cup o' tea?"

"No," said Granny Phyllis, rising. "The *daddy*'ll be waitin' for me in the village. I told 'im I would be there at eight, an' I reckon by this time 'e's showin' im-self off at the cokernut stalls at the Fair. . . . Well,

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good night, our Deb." She reached up and kissed the grim face tenderly. "Now don't you get all worked up about what that daft Sally told y'. . . . It's all a lyin' tale, you'll find. Good night, my dear."

"I'll come to the gate with you," said Aunt Deborah. "You shouldn't ha' walked up 'ere. I dunna know whether you ought to go back alone."

"Fiddlesticks," said Granny Phyllis, as they walked down the drive. She saw that her daughter's little grey eyes were turned anxiously towards the lane. For a moment they stood at the gate, staring down the moonlit lane and listening to the thin grinding of the music and the roaring of the crowd at the fair, and watching the red light in the sky over the village. "Well, I'll be goin'. . . . Good night, our Deb. And dunna get worryin' y'self and all on 'em about nothin'."

"Good night, mother," said Aunt Deborah non-committally.

She stood at the gate watching the little vigorous figure pushing off into the darkness. She should never have come by herself and on foot. . . . Then Aunt Deborah sighed. Would they never come? . . . She searched the white road beyond the blot that represented Granny Phyllis. No, they were not coming. . . .

And as she stood there, so grim and lonely and determined, she seemed like a woman who had been shut out of the world and confined far from the sweet intercourse of kindly folk. The music went grinding thinly on, the roar grew monotonous, and the moonlight illuminated the side of her grim head, throwing into prominence the great nose and grim mouth. Her grey eyes flashed as the pupils moved. . . .

Rover barked behind the house, and after a last weary glance she turned and stalked up the drive.

### 3

At eight forty-five there were steps in the yard and the sound of giggling. No word had come from Sally

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Twitten, and Sylvester was late. Aunt Deborah glanced darkly at the door, and then strode across and opened it.

"What's all this? Where's Yvonne?" she demanded of Belle and startled Johnny.

"She's comin' on with Jack."

"What?"

"She's following on with Jack."

She considered the answer. "An' time too!" she said angrily. "Time y' was all in bed, where all decent folk am by this time! An' you, young man, y'd better be off!"

"Yes, cert'nly," said Johnny, and, calling a subdued good night, he slunk off, and Belle, whose fair face was flushed with resentment, followed her mother into the house.

"An' it's about time y'did come," said Aunt Deborah. "What's this I bin 'earin'?"

"What? What about?"

"About you an' ur an' y'r shameful goin's-on down there!"

Belle stared. "Why, we haven't done anything! Why, who's bin tellin' y' that?"

Mrs. Winterton snorted. "Oh, y'think because y've got a free leg an' can doll y'self up as y' can do what y' like!" she said bitterly. Belle wondered at the exaggerated anger of her mother. "Oh, I've 'eerd all about it, my gel! Swings an' roundabouts an' Rugger-'am chaps, an' all the time ur 'usband away, an' ur carryin' on like that, the shameful 'ussy ur!"

"Why——!" began poor Belle indignantly, but her mother strode over to the door.

"'Ow far am them two be'ind?" she demanded, turning from the open door. Her manner was curiously restless and suspicious.

"They're here," Belle reluctantly replied, hearing the click of the gate.

"I should think so, too! About time, if y' ask me!" she said, pacing into the room and back to the door again. And as she reached it Yvonne rushed in, collided with

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her so that she fell back with a grunt, her one hand violently pushing back the girl.

"Ere, what's the game?" she cried angrily, in a voice that startled Gaffer John in the ingle-nook.

Jack appeared at the open door, alarm in his eyes, a penny water-squirt bought at the Fair in his hands.

"Madame, your pardon!" stammered Yvonne, recoiling with pale face from the tall, gaunt, grim figure. Belle watched all in despairing silence.

"Dunna talk to me!" Aunt Deborah almost screamed, and their hearts jumped at the sound. "I'm sure I dunno what devil's in y' to keep y' troublin' folks this way!"

"But what's the matter?" asked Young Jack. "It was only fun, mother!"

"Fun? *Fun*, was it?" she said, her angry, suspicious glance upon him and upon Yvonne. "H'm! *You* call it *fun*, the way ur's bin actin' down there, do y'? *You* call it *fun* when all the village is talkin' about ur shameful goin's on? Then if that's y'r idea o' fun the Lord Almighty 'elp y', that's all I can say!"

"But, madame, I am sorry," pleaded Yvonne in a puzzled tone.

"H'm! Some use!"

"What's the matter, then?" asked Young Jack, a hint of anger in his voice, as they followed her into the house.

"Oh, I've 'eard all about it! I can unnerstand *ur* doin' it, because I know *ur's* got no shame, but that our Belle should ha' done it licks me! But it just shows!"

"But I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"Y'know very well!" she replied, raising her voice again in an exasperated manner. "Ridin' about on the 'osses an' showin' their—their limbs shameful, an' strange chaps with their arms round ur, an' ur 'usband away, an' all the village up in arms about it!" She paused to draw a great breath. "Y' know——"

"Who's been telling you this?"

"Sally Twitten!" said Belle angrily.

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"Well, it's not true, mother. You take it from me, there isn't a word of truth in it. . . . And I think you ought to be more careful what you believe about your son and daughter. It seems anybody can come here and run us down, and you'll believe it."

"No, I dunna," she said, shaken a little by the unusual anger of her favourite. Perhaps, after all? . . .

"An' y' know very well that's wrong. I can stick up for me own as well as the next! But I shall stick up for me own just as long as me own stick up for me, an' for what is right an' proper! An' you can't deny this!"

"I do deny it! It's a pure lie!"

"And so do I!" said Belle.

"What about the chaps from Ruggen'am?"

"I've been with Yvonne, and she hasn't spoken to a chap from Ruggenham all day. We introduced her to one or two of our friends, but they were all from round about—Alf Jackson and Tom Bonner and Willie Cartwright."

"Sally said Ruggen'am chaps!"

"Sally be d——d!" he exploded, his good-looking face dark with anger. His mother stiffened at the word.

"You mind what y' sayin'," she said angrily. And turning impotently away: "I'm sure I dunno what the world's comin' to!" She threw herself into a chair and moved her gaunt shoulders wrathfully. "I know one thing, you an' ur are drivin' me to me grave!"

There was silence, while Belle, with sullen, downcast face, busied herself with the tea-pot.

"Madame, it is that you are angry with me?" asked Yvonne in a low voice, bending before the stiff, formidable figure.

"Dunna speak to me! What you want is a good 'oss-whip!"

Yvonne studied the grim face, the tightly drawn hair, the down-curved mouth with its Methodist creases beside it, the great nose, the brilliant grey eyes, and the stiff, stringy neck.

"It is that we are late?" she asked in distress. She

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had not understood the charge against her, so quickly had they spoken.

“Oh, dunna talk to me!” said Aunt Deborah, turning her back abruptly upon the girl.

In the silence that followed the three young people eyed her. Then Belle and Jack crossed glances, and glanced away in despair. Yvonne stood looking from one to the other, her fingers playing restlessly with the glass bangles upon her beautiful naked arms. And she could not guess how the tinkle of the bangles irritated Aunt Deborah.

“Come and have a cup of tea, Yvonne,” said Belle sullenly.

Yvonne turned to her, smiling drearily. “No, thank you, *chérie*,” she said, and walked over to the stair-door, looking very lonely and friendless as her careless glance travelled wearily about the too familiar objects in the dark, little room, the dead grandfather clock, the unfriendly squab, the “Rock of Ages” with its lurid lights, the simpering “Wedding Bells,” and the oil-lamp casting a confined yellow patch of light upon the table-cloth and the simple supper utensils, and the cluster of lilac yarrow tipped with old gold. “I think I go to bed. . . . Sylvester? He has not arrived? He will not be long?”

“He won’t be long, Yvonne. . . . But I *do* wish you’d have a cup of tea, dear!” pleaded Belle, heartily sorry for her.

“No, I do not need it, thank you, Belle. . . . I have the *migraine* . . . the head-ache. Good night!”

As the sister and brother spoke their quiet good nights, she looked at the mother. But there was no response.

### 4

Granny Mary came in about nine, her best Sunday bonnet and cape on, her bunched cheeks rosier than ever, and when the tale had been told she tossed her old head. “There isna any truth in it at all, Deb!” she said indignantly. “I bin down in the village all night, an’ I’ve

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talked to three or four on the road, an' not one whisper 'ave I 'eard!"

"They wouldna tell *you*," said Aunt Deborah glumly.

And then came the sound of the motor-cycle clattering up the drive, and Sylvester came in, followed by Farmer John, who had accepted a ride in the side-car from the village. Sylvester was alive with news. The shop in Hendiford was taken, it was in a good position, the terms were favourable, Erb Boulger had promised to spend all his spare time—he was engaged in a greengrocer's shop—helping them to get it ship-shape, and there was time to build up a small connection before the Christmas sales. The shop was to be painted up, he had arranged to have "Dawe & Winterton, Poulterers" (their agreed sign), done in fine letters of gold above the window, and they were going to supply rabbits and turkeys and fowl and ducks—and chiefly ducks—to the miners of the Chase. Jack's face brightened, and forgetting the distressful event of the evening, he plunged into details, while Sylvester, after briefly inquiring for Yvonne and being as briefly answered, sat down to his supper of bread and cheese and a Spanish onion, with tea. The pair plunged into an enthusiastic review of the new venture.

Curiously enough, Aunt Deborah said nothing to him about the night's happening.

Then, just as Sylvester sat back from the table and took out his French pipe—a poor affair—and his twisted packet of cheap tobacco, in came Sally Twitten.

"I canna find 'em nowheer!" she called from the doorway. "An' it's my belief as they've gone off to Ruggen'am—— 'Ello, am they theer?" she said, in a disappointed tone. "Wheer's Yvonne?"

Covert glances were cast at Aunt Deborah and at Sylvester.

"She's in bed. Where d'y' think?" asked Belle scornfully, elevating her chin before the tale-bearer. "And if you'd got a bit more work to attend to you'd be a better woman, and wouldn't have so much time to carry lies about!"

"Why——!" began Sally.

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“That’ll do, Belle!” said Aunt Deborah.

“What’s this daft tale y’ve bin tellin’?” demanded Granny Mary. “I’ve ’eard naught o’ no gooin’s-on, an’ I’ve bin both in the lanes an’ in the village an’ by the side o’ the Fair!”

“What’s the matter?” asked Sylvester, scenting danger to Yvonne.

“She’s been telling tales to mother about us, saying that we’ve not been acting proper down at the Fair,” said Belle. “And she’s told mother that all the village is talking about us.”

“I didna say that. . . . I said they *would* be!” said Sally, tears beginning to run down her haggard cheeks. “But if that’s all the thanks I get I’ll go! An’ me sufferin’ like I do! I only spoke as a Christian woman oughter! . . . Oo-oo!” And turning about she ran out of the house, making a noise like the howling of wind in the chimney.

“Eh?” said Gaffer Johnny, starting.

“Good riddance!” said Belle.

Aunt Deborah opened her mouth to speak, but said nothing: She was feeling unsure of her ground.

“Is Yvonne in bed?” asked Sylvester.

“Yes,” said Belle, and he went up to her, hearing their voices breaking out behind him as he climbed the stairs.

She was lying, still dressed, upon the bed, as she had lain after the Fête, but now there was more of anger than of grief in her face. He sat down beside her, and kissed her warmly. She sighed heavily, saying nothing.

“What’s my mad little Montmartroise been doing now?” he asked.

She smiled wanly, and shrugged. “Your little mad Montmartroise, it appears, is always doing something that she should not do,” she said in French, rather bitterly, he thought. Then, turning to him: “Explain to me how I have sinned this time, *mon cher*,” she asked.

“As far as I can see Sally Twitten’s been telling lies to Aunt Deborah about you and Belle and the rest going mad down there,” he said, half-smiling to inspirit her.



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"But it's not worth worrying about, Yvonne. Sally's just been in, and has gone out howling. Don't worry about it. You should laugh at these things, Yvonne."

She said nothing for a moment. "Daily it grows harder to laugh at such things," she said strangely. And then her spirit fled, and she crumpled up, sobbing, in his arms. "Oh, Sylvie, my dear, I had enjoyed myself so much at the Fair—the lights and the people and the fun, as if it had been a promise of Paris at Christmas, and I was prepared to love all the world in exchange for such happiness, and to work as I have never worked before, so happy had I been. . . . And she was bitter, and would have struck me! . . . She loves me not! . . . It becomes certain that she hates me!"

"Oh, you mustn't say things like that, Yvonne," he said anxiously. "Aunt certainly doesn't hate you. She's had a hard life. She's been brought up to believe that certain things are bad and other things are good, and she can't be made to see that her bad is sometimes nothing of the kind. But you know, *chérie*, that at bottom she is a good woman. I never thought so in the old days. I thought she was simply a sour old woman, a spoil-sport. But I think otherwise now. I seem to see her better. She would work herself to the bone for her children, and if you happened to be ill she would gladly give her life to save you, I'm sure. You know, dear, I'm rather sorry for her in some ways."

"I, too," said Yvonne, sighing. "Sometimes I look at her, and think that I would like to put my arms about her and kiss her and tell her that secretly she is loved, in spite of herself and her religion. For I have seen her many little kindnesses, her struggle to uphold her faith, her sincerity. And I know that my coming was a great trial for her, and that she must have shown great forbearance at times, when innocently I have broken her commandments. Oh, yes, I have seen all that, and then I could put her upon a pedestal as a very fine woman, a martyr almost, to her faith. . . . But then, at other times she seems naught but a horrible tyrant whose one aim it is to make my life a misery!"

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“You must not worry about these little tiffs,” he said. “We shall live through them, and then—then you will not be made unhappy for nothing like this.” He bent nearer to say urgently: “Never forget, my dear, that I love you, more and more and more each day. Don’t let these little things torment you. I love you, Yvonne!”

She pressed her lips to his, and he was conscious of the seductiveness of her pale beauty in the dark bedroom. “Oh, it is good to hear you say so, my dear!” she said. “And you must love me yet more, so great is my need!” And then, with quick, agonized desire: “Oh, don’t you see that I have given up my world for you . . . *all* . . . *all*? . . . That I am alone here, as if I had died out of my old life, the dear, gay life I knew? . . . Not that I regret, Sylvie, my dear. Never! Never! I would do it again for you. . . . But oh, Sylvie, I want to feel always that you will love me, and will try to understand, and be as you always have been, my dear lover, Sylvie!”

She wept, and his heart grew hot as he pressed her fiercely to him, and fiercely reiterated his love. Always Aunt Deborah seemed to be tormenting his wife. . . . Oh, with what a little grain of imagination so much could have been avoided!

Suddenly she turned in his arms, and he sensed that comfort had come to her. “But the months go by, Sylvester, and soon we shall return,” she said, her wet eyes lighting up the darkness.

“Three months only, *chérie*,” he said. “You don’t know that we’ve taken a shop in Hendiford, do you, dear? Yes. And we’re thinking of renting stalls in Ruggenham and Hendiford and Stafford markets for the Christmas sales, so that there will be a fine haul of money, and you will not be disappointed again, my dear!”

She clung to him in the darkness. “Ah, you could not disappoint me again, Sylvie!” she said, in a low, urgent voice.

He reassured her, and went downstairs with the comfortable knowledge that he had lightened her heart.

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### 5

Farmer John sat nodding over his asthma pipe, his elbow on the arm of his chair, a great, flabby hand crushing his side-whisker against his red face. His great stomach rested upon his thin thighs, and he looked like an old child, tired after the innocent amusements of the day, with neither care nor fret to bar him from sleep. Belle and Gaffer Johnny had gone to bed, and the young men, carried away by their enthusiasm, had gone off in the dark to the duck-pens, a storm lantern swaying in Sylvie's hand, its pale light reflected in dancing waves upon the walls of the house and the barns. Granny Mary sat peeling an orange, one of the first of the year; she had bought them from a stall near the Fair.

On the opposite side of the fire Aunt Deborah sat with her spectacles upon her great nose, the Family Bible before her, the orange Granny Mary had given her lying untouched upon her lap. Her grim head was bent above the book, but her mind would not focus decently upon the sacred words.

It was mortifying, this not knowing whether y'd acted right or wrong, she thought. If Sally were lying, which seemed increasingly probable, then aunt had been unjust to Yvonne, gravely unjust. But some part of her brain would reiterate that Sally was not lying, that only half the truth had been told, that you know what gels are, that if it wasn't wholly true there were disgraceful details, that Yvonne was good enough (which meant bad enough) for anything, and that her whole conduct since she had come pointed to the possibility of the truth of Sally's story. . . . But again she would feel a sensation as if the world shook beneath the hard-and-fast rules of her prejudice. How if it had been done innocently? How if it would not be offensive in God's sight? . . . (She snorted.) . . . But how if it was *not* true? How if Sally had been lying? She moved uncomfortably, and cast a lowering glance over her book at the dying fire. How if it was *not* true?

But it was over now, and the young men would return

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in a few minutes, and her chapter for the night was still unread. She moved the Book so that the yellow lamp-light fell upon the broad page, a little grunt of impatience coming from her lips to mark her troubled mind. And she read :

¶ *"Finally, be ye all of one mind. . . ."*

How could y' be all of one mind, while the devil played havoc with the world, and there was beer and fast French madams brought into y'r 'ome to alienate y' from y'r children, and meck y'r 'air grey? . . . But at this rate the chapter would never be read. . . .

¶ *"Finally, be ye all of one mind. . . ."*

(Huh !)

¶ *"Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous. Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing, but contrariwise blessing: knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing."*

The red colour crept sombrely into her hard face. Like as if it was the Almighty Voice itself speakin' . . .

She glanced from the printed words to the fire, and sighed heavily, thinking of Yvonne in the dark little bedroom overhead. Then, with a decision that marked all her movements, she closed the Book, and, taking no heed of Granny's stare, crossed the room and went upstairs.

She tapped twice before Yvonne awoke and called some French word that Aunt Deborah took to mean "Enter." She went in, and met the stare of the beautiful eyes in the light of her candle.

"Madame?" said Yvonne.

"Are y' comfortable, child?" asked Aunt Deborah

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awkwardly, grasping the bed-clothes in her red, calloused hand. "I think y' could do with a thicker blanket on 'ere."

"No, it is quite well, so, madame," said Yvonne gratefully.

There was silence for a moment, while Aunt Deborah looked down at the candle, and pretended to be fixing it more securely in its candle-stick. Yvonne's glance was upon the hard, lonely face.

"P'raps I was a bit 'asty to-night, my dear," said Aunt Deborah, in a low, resentful tone. "I shouldna ha' said them things to y', an' I'm sorry, if that's any good. . . . I didn't mean to treat y' roughly."

Yvonne sat up in bed, and, careless of candle-grease, threw her arms about the grim figure.

"Oh, what on earth——!" began Aunt Deborah.

"Madame, it is not necessary that you say so, that you are sorry," said Yvonne. "You thought that we had done wrong, and it was right that you were angry. . . . But in truth, madame, we had not."

"There, there, lie down and go to sleep now, an' forget it," said Aunt Deborah, almost roughly. "An' I'll try not to believe any more tales about y', my lass. . . ." And suddenly she bent down and kissed the girl warmly upon the cheek. "There. Now get off to sleep, an' try to think kindly o' we old dour folk, what seem to do more wrong when we try to do right. . . . Good night, Yvonne."

"Good night, madame. And you must not fret that I——"

"Yes, a thicker blanket y' want, I'm sure," interrupted Aunt Deborah, grasping the bed-clothes as if they had been a sheet-anchor. "I'll get one out to-morrer for y'. . . . Good night, an' God bless y', my lass." And hardly had Yvonne breathed a puzzled good night when the door closed upon the tall, grim figure with its candle, and darkness fell upon the room.

Yvonne snuggled down into bed, and sighed at the pitiful thought of grim Aunt Deborah.

And Aunt Deborah, descending the stairs carefully in

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fear of falling candle-grease, sighed heavily at the pitiful thought of Yvonne, her brilliant grey eyes looking rueful and distressed in the candle-light.

At the stair-foot, in answer to Granny's stare, she blew out the candle with a vigorous “Poof!”

“Time them young men was in bed,” she said, in her hard, uncompromising voice. “Ten o'clock an' after, an' them trapesin' round them wet fields. . . . Pneumonia or summat, next, I expect!” she ended disgustedly, as she took up her Bible.

But Granny Mary smiled in secret, and nearly swallowed a pip. For she had been listening at the stair-foot.

## CHAPTER XXII

### DISASTER

#### I

THERE are some hopes that, being long-continued, grow into nervous obsessions whose strength is such that their victim ranges from the highest thrill of exhilarating anticipation to the lowest depths of despair, when hope seems lost for ever. So with Yvonne, as the days crept forward on leaden feet towards Christmas, and the year died and stark shapes took the place of Nature's soft beauties. Sometimes she would wake in the night and weep with delight at the near prospect of Paris, and sometimes in the daytime it would appear but a bitter mirage. Hour after hour, day after day, spent in drab toil in the dark kitchen, with a world of rain and slush and bitter winds without, and within the too-close presence of the family, all tended to wash the colour from her life. It was all very well to enjoy the beauties of the country in the warm months, but now to her town nerves the bleak countryside seemed like one great prison, the farm her cell; even in summer it had been a prison, a prison of green bars, but now it was a prison of bare black trees and wet ploughed lands and brimming puddles and streams, where only the fog and the rooks and the rats seemed at home. Sylvester was very busy with the shop at Hendiford, and in spite of his acute solicitude for her, there were many tense moments in the dark kitchen, of which he remained in ignorance.

It was within four days of their departure for Paris, and a very important day in the life of the duck-farm, for the Christmas fat stock must be prepared for the market. When Yvonne descended in her clogs and apron at six-thirty a morning fog sheeted the windows, and the air was cold and dank. Granny Mary and Aunt Deborah

## Disaster

built a cheerless little fire in the grate while Yvonne and Belle prepared a meagre breakfast for the men. Yvonne had been disturbed in the night by bad dreams that left her mind dispirited, her nerves unsteady. The morning came, and always there was Aunt Deborah's knock at six-thirty; then followed the heavy work of the farm, the boiled swedes and the fat bacon for the midday meal, the tea, the short talks with the menfolk at night, and then bed and the inhospitable silence of the country night. And it was no use trying to force happiness into oneself with thought of Paris; some element in the dream denied her, rising between her and the gay city of the south.

And Aunt Deborah seemed very grim this morning, Yvonne thought; she looked very old and formidable, like a pitiable ogre, in the dim light of the kitchen, where always in the morning hours there seemed to linger the scent of Farmer's asthma "tobacco."

"You amna lookin' very peart this mornin', my dear," said Granny Mary, scanning Yvonne's pale face. The girl seemed to get graver each day, she thought. "What's the matter? . . . Amna y' sleepin' well?"

"I sleep ver' bad, with the dreams," said Yvonne, smiling with difficulty as she bent to kiss the old lady, whose cheeks were never redder than after their morning's wash. "But now it has gone, thank you."

"Ah, well, y'll soon be enj'yin' y'self in Paris, my dear," said Granny Mary, and saw the quick light in the girl's eyes. "Four more days, isna it?"

"Yes, we go on Sunday," said Yvonne, with a full heart.

"H'm!" said Aunt Deborah unexpectedly, stirring her cup of tea vigorously. "If y' ask me I dunno why y're goin'! Teckin' the money what ought to be spent in more stock in the spring, an' settin' up the business proper! The cream o' the business it'll teck!" It wasn't right, she thought. Fancy any other young wife of a farmer wanting to spend the year's profits on going to Paris. Course, it was ur home, but as ur'd elected to marry an Englishman an' come to England, why, then, ur ought to stop in England an' meck it ur 'ome, as it'd



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got to be. Every visit to Paris would meck it wuss for ur. Who knows what lapses there might not have been when they came back? . . . And it wasna right to Jack, just when ae'd got engaged to Marion, an' there was 'opes as the farm might be cleared o' debt an' prosper. These old debts, that was 'ateful to a Christian. . . . "Why canna y' stop 'ere?" she suddenly demanded of the girl.

Yvonne stared at her, like one a little tired of eternal explanations and eternal misjudgings. "Is it that you mean on Sunday, madame?" she asked.

"Course. Why canna y' stop 'ere? Y've only bin come eight months or less?"

"But my friends, madame, and, above all, my sister Berthe, will be there, and we shall all gather together and be happy again, as we were in the olden days," said Yvonne, like one telling over her beads.

"H'm!" snorted Aunt Deborah at the inference. "That means to say as we've bin bad to y'!"

"Ah, no, madame!" said Yvonne quickly. "It is not so. You have not been so to me, but only good and kind. It is"—(she glanced about the dark little kitchen, searching for the root of her unhappiness)—"I know not, but it is not as Paris."

"Course," said Granny Mary. "There's no place like 'ome."

"H'm!"

"And when I return, madame," said Yvonne, looking up at the tall, grim woman, and staring at the Roman nose and its tiny mole, "I work very hard for you."

"What I canna get at is why y' want to go at all! 'Cordin' to what Sylvie an' Jack was sayin' it's goin' to cost the best o' twenty pound!"

"It is much," said Yvonne timidly, glancing away to the dense fog through the window. "But not too much. I would give all the world to return."

Aunt Deborah, thinking of the farm's debts and of Jack's first profits, tossed her head. "I expect y' would," she said acidly. "But who's goin' to pay for all this spendin', d'y' think?"

## Disaster

"Oh, it isn't much, and it's only one holiday," said Belle. "And Yvonne looks as if she needs it badly."

"So do I," said poor Aunt Deborah. "I 'avena 'ad a 'oliday for thirty year an' more."

"I know, Deb," said Granny Mary, the light of sympathetic understanding in her old blue eyes. "But we're older, an' the young uns feel the need o' these things more."

"An' 'ow's ae gonna settle down, an' rent this 'ouse ae's talkin' about an' furnish it if they gad off with the profits? No, what they oughter do is to save money 'stead o' spendin' it. What y' want to do, my gel, is to be sensible an' forget France an' all about it!"

Yvonne shook her head, smiling unhappily. "Ah, that is what one cannot do, madame," she murmured, sighing deeply as she took her bucket to the tap in the scullery.

"Dunna be 'ard on the little lass, our Deb," said Granny Mary earnestly. "These am 'ard days for ur. . . . I know 'ow y' feel about this money, an' in the ornery way it'd be proper daft to spend it like this, but with ur it's different."

"Y' think I dunna unnerstand?" asked Aunt Deborah in her hard voice. "That's just where y're mistook. But we've all 'ad to meck sacrifices, you an' y' old clothes and Belle, too, same's everybody else!"

"I amna grumblin'," said Granny Mary.

"Nor me," said Belle.

"No, nor nobody else! But what I'm willin' to do I expect others to be willin' to do. It'd do ur proud spirit good, and knock a bit o' Christian sense into ur, an' a bit o' this sinful fast life out on ur to be med stop an' never go back!" she said flatly, but without sincerity, waving a black hand and a shining gratebrush at Granny Mary. She drew breath after the long sentence, hesitated over a remark, and turning to the grate, said: "But I expect ur 'll 'ave ur own way!"

"I'll go an' give the men a knock," said Granny Mary, from the bottom of the stairs.

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### 2

It was Yvonne's turn to scrub the scullery floor, and when she had finished she carried out her bucket of suds in the thinning fog to the drain in the yard. As she bent to empty her bucket she saw in the dim yellow light that her clog stood upon clotted red blood. Her affrighted glance travelled out from the clog to the abundant traces of crimson upon the bricks about the drain. And as she stood, shocked and startled by the sight, Sylvester and Jack and Johnny came round the southern wing from the Home Field, carrying flapping ducks. Sylvester, she saw, carried a small, pointed, stained knife in his hand, and there was blood upon their aprons and hands. She dropped her bucket with a clatter that brought out Aunt Deborah into the yard.

"Ah, *mon Dieu!*" began Yvonne, wishing to fly, but held by her fluttering nerves to the spot.

"What's the matter?" asked Sylvester anxiously.

"What's up?" asked Aunt Deborah, coming forward.

"I was frightened of the . . . what you say? . . . *le sang*—" began Yvonne, when her horrified stare was centred upon Johnny, who was proceeding innocently to the murder of a duck. And before Sylvester or Jack could stay his hand he had tucked the duck between his legs and had made an incision in the side of its head.

"Johnny——!"

"Here, stop that——!"

"What say?" said Johnny, raising his head in alarm at their cries. And the flapping duck fell through his knees.

The subsequent happenings were like a nightmare to Yvonne. The wounded duck hung from Johnny's one hand, and as he bent to take a grip of it it escaped altogether, and staggered to its feet. Aunt Deborah, with a brief: "You fool!" bent her great length and seized the duck and the knife in one movement, and thrust the knife adeptly through the duck's head, so that the blood gushed out upon the creamy white feathers. The young men knew that Aunt Deborah hated cruelty.

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Yvonne fainted, her last thought of the bitter cold of the frozen bricks of the courtyard, and the possibility of there being blood beneath her hand.

Then Granny Mary was holding some small, bright object to her nose, and she started back from the unclean smell of ammonia.

"All right, love?" asked Granny Mary, and Yvonne saw that they stood round her, while Sylvester knelt at her side, supporting her head as she lay on the hard wooden squab.

"Yes, I am better, thank you." She laughed in an endeavour to inspirit herself, and Sylvester, who had been studying her pale, unconscious face with keen anxiety, was startled by the thought that she laughed rarely in these days—she, the former light of gay Montmartre. "It is the killing of the ducks . . . the *sang* . . . what you say? Blood? . . . Yes. I did not know."

"Well, I declare, ur's all shook to pieces!" said Aunt Deborah in tones of wonder. "Y'd better teck it easy for a bit, my dear."

But when they had turned again to their work Sylvester remained anxiously beside her. "Aren't you well, *chérie*?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," she said. "But I have not seen killing . . . *comme ça* . . . It is not nice, I think." And a shudder passed over her.

He kissed her and whispered in her ear: "Four days, *chérie*!"

Yvonne glanced quickly above his shoulder, to gauge her distance from the family. "Sylvester, my dear!" she said quickly in French. "You will not fail me this time? Oh, my dear, I could not live if you failed me again! Oh, Sylvester, you will take me back? You will not disappoint me again?"

He answered her with hoarse promises, shocked to find her nerves in such condition, and when he left her it was with a worried look upon his dark face.

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## 3

All day long the warm, fetid stink of disembowelled ducks had filled the dark kitchen of the farm. The young men and girls were employed in plucking the never-ending stream of ducks, while at the table Granny Mary, Aunt Deborah and Mrs. Briscoe prepared the plucked bodies for market. There were exchanges of rough country humour, particularly after Miss Twitten arrived to help, but Sylvester noticed that Yvonne looked very grave, spoke little, and seemed to work doggedly, as if she feared to stop and laugh for fear that she might weep.

And then at six Johnny, who was to take the ducks to Hendiford in time for to-morrow's Christmas buyings, came up with the lorry, the ducks were packed upon it, and he started off in the snow, pulling up his coat-collar about his thin neck as he ran down Lovers' Lane.

The village street was deserted, but lights shone behind the red blinds and the doors and windows of the black and white "Goat's Head" were invitingly flushed with lights from the fires within. Then out beyond the village upon the Ruggenham Road he went, and the white countryside was about him. He stuck a cigarette between his lips, stopped and lit it, and then proceeded with a little red glow warming his nose, his throat humming a ribald song.

Faster came the snow, coming down with a helter-skelter that soon whitened the road and hung feathers in Johnny's eyebrows. At the turn the windows of the "Bull and Spectacles" were red beacons of comfort in a white, inhospitable night, and Johnny drew up before its doors, brushed the snow from his lashes, looked to the ropes that fastened the baskets of ducks upon the lorry, and with rabbit teeth chattering, dived into the doorway of the inn.

He was met by a hoarse clatter of voices, and through the thin blue mist of tobacco smoke he saw a rustic company gathered within the little bar, where a Christmas fire roared. There was a calling for pots of ale and an argumentative timbre about the talk, and in

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the air was a smell of Christmas, for the hostess was baking her mince-pies in the adjacent kitchen. A few of the men wore sprays of mistletoe, and there were holly sprays behind the pictures of bygone sporting life upon the walls.

"'Ello, my lad!" cried the tall, genial host, nodding to Johnny. "'Ere, ma, a glass for Johnny Waters. Free drinks to-night, y' know, Johnny."

"Haw! Haw!" guffawed Johnny. "What time d'y' close?"

There was a roar of laughter, and then Johnny noticed Mr. Samuel Redfin arguing heatedly in a corner, his red face redder than usual, his little eyes very bright, the ends of his inordinate moustache flecked with alefroth.

They were talking about tricks.

"'Ere, Sammy," said Johnny Waters. "I know a better trick than that."

"What is it?"

"Wait a minute," said Johnny, and hurried into the kitchen, to return with a brown egg in his hand.

"Oh, I know that!" said Mr. Redfin scornfully. "Pressin' it at both ends to try an' break it! But y' canna do that y'self!"

"No," said Johnny with portentous solemnity. "It's a new trick." And then he suddenly guffawed. "Well, not 'zactly new, but I dunna think y've seen it afore."

"Come on, what is it?" demanded Mr. Redfin impatiently.

"Go outside, 'ide this egg on y', an' I bet y' I guess where it is in three guesses. Can y' do it?"

"Yes, I can."

There was a shuffling, and subdued merriment, and two habitués found it necessary to adjourn to the kitchen, where they laughed at silent ease beneath the indignant eye of the floury-armed hostess.

"A dollar, then?" said Johnny Waters.

"Right!" said Mr. Redfin, seizing the egg and making off into the kitchen, followed closely by Alec Jackson, a treacherous ally.

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There was hearty but subdued laughter, and much smiting of brawny country knees, and then, in a portentous silence, Mr. Redfin marched, in stately style, into the warm little bar. Beneath his cap was an obtrusive lump.

"Right," he said.

"Right-o," said Johnny. He touched Mr. Redfin's coat pocket. "Is it 'ere?"

"No. That's one!"

"'Ere?" said Johnny, touching Mr. Redfin's breast with an inquisitive forefinger.

"No. That's two! The dollar's mine!"

"'Ere!" said Johnny, placing his hand with a calm, firm pressure upon the obtrusive lump beneath Mr. Redfin's cap.

There was a roar of laughter, and horrified Mr. Redfin lifted his cap and disclosed . . .

But further one need not pry. Suffice it that Johnny considered himself lucky to escape with his life out into the cold night.

### 4

The young people of the farm were seated round the fire, and Marion was talking to Yvonne about Paris, while Aunt Deborah and Granny Mary were making the Christmas puddings. Yvonne had suddenly recovered from her depression, and now she spoke of France and of Berthe and of Pai's with a glow in her cheeks. Aunt Deborah listened in resigned silence.

Suddenly there were stumbling feet in the yard, and the door was knocked. Aunt Deborah opened it, and Johnny Waters, looking white as a ghost, staggered into the room. His clothes were wet and muddied, and his one arm was roughly bound up, but a dark stain showed upon the bandage.

"Johnny!" cried Belle.

They questioned him, but for a moment he could not speak. He was breathless, and looked as if he might

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faint. Then he said: "A collision . . . other bloke on 'is wrong side . . . fog!"

The young men jumped to their feet. "What? Where?" demanded Sylvester in feverish alarm.

"In the lane. . . . It was a big towerin' car, an' ae'd got on to 'is wrong side. . . . The Ford was smashed, an' the ducks . . . all about the road in the mud. . . . Got Farmer Bright an' 'is chaps to look after 'em. . . ." And then Johnny crumpled up beside the table, and sobs shook him.

"I should think so, indeed!" said Aunt Deborah angrily.

"Don't say any more!" said Young Jack. "We must try an' get them in in time for the market. . . . But, lord, what can we do without the car?"

Sylvester glanced at Yvonne. She caught his glance and turned grey. "You do not mean——?" she began, starting back from him.

He shook his head, grinding his teeth together.

### 5

The young men returned at eleven, and their faces were dark. The lorry was a wreck upon the Ruggenham Road, the ducks, upon which so much depended, were smashed and filthy, and it was small consolation to know that Johnny had had but one pint of ale—in truth, it had not been Johnny's fault—and that they possessed the address of the owner of the "towerin'" car. One cannot go to law upon an empty pocket. Their work of the year was wasted. Some of the ducks could be cleaned and sent to the shop, but most of them were a mangled mass upon the slush of the road.

Only Gaffer John had gone to bed. The rest turned eagerly as the young men entered. Johnny's face was white with despair.

"Well?" demanded Aunt Deborah.

Sylvester shrugged.

"There's not much salvage," said Young Jack.



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"We shall have to wash it out as a bad debt. Has Marion gone?"

While they gathered about Jack to hear details Sylvester went over to Yvonne. He sat down upon the squab, sighed heavily, and covered his face with his hands.

"Ah, do not!" she said bitterly. "What is the use? I knew in my dream that it was so! I am a prisoner here for ever, until *le Bon Dieu* releases me!" And with a twisted smile on her white lips she rose and went upstairs.

And all night long she would not listen to his explanations and his protestations of love, but she laughed bitterly. She did not weep, he noticed in alarm. It seemed that her grief bit deeper than tears could salve. She lay still, and put by him and his useless words with a wearied gesture. She did not sleep until the dawn light was stealing through the window, and he wept over her.

Once she half waked, and muttered: "Berthe my sister." And then she laughed in a hard, bitter fashion.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE SPIRIT OF PERVERSITY

#### I

"A **HAPPY** Christmas!" cried Belle to Yvonne on Christmas morning, and Granny Mary kissed her, while Aunt Deborah smiled encouragingly.

"Thank you. And to you, also," she replied listlessly, endeavouring to keep the bitterness from her voice. "What is this?" She indicated a little heap of parcels beside her plate.

"Open them and see!" said Belle.

Yvonne sat down, and her fluttering fingers brought out of the various packets a pair of woolly gloves "*with Love from Granny Mary*," a box of chocolates "*From Belle*," a thick, warm knitted scarf "*From Aunt Deborah*," an ivory bracelet "*From Jack*," a silver wristlet watch "*From Sylvie with Love*," and a tiny doll (this was humour), "*From Farmer John to His Little Girl*."

"But——!" began Yvonne. "Ah, it is too good of you. . . . And I have nothing to give." She rose and kissed them. Granny noticed that she closed her eyes as she kissed Aunt Deborah.

And then in came Sylvester and Young Jack, carrying the log, for they had decided to make it a real old Christmas, with as much fun as could be crammed into the day, in order to please Yvonne. They had trimmed the house with holly and mistletoe and coloured garlands, and Young Jack had been seen entangled in wire in the scullery, a new pair of headphones on his ears, and a tiny crystal set before him. Aunt Deborah had invited all the relatives and friends to tea. She seemed to watch the silent Yvonne in fear; the girl had suddenly become

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remote behind that pale mask of hers. Aunt Deborah knew that there had been some talk by Sylvester and Jack of borrowing money from Granny Phyllis, but when a letter came from Berthe, saying that she could not visit Paris at Christmas, for she was expecting soon to become a mother and the doctor had advised rest, Sylvester seemed to have dropped the idea. And a good job, too, thought Aunt Deborah; for such a betrayal of the family honour would have caused an explosion. One's relatives knew too much about one already. . . .

Then breakfast was taken, a great pork-pie (which is the only dish for Christmas morning in the village) gracing the centre of the table. Young Jack and Farmer John went round with sprigs of mistletoe, but a laugh could not be coaxed from Yvonne. She smiled, and seemed to try to shake herself into humour, but the dark little kitchen seemed to oppress her at every attempt.

And after breakfast everybody betook themselves to the mighty preparations for the party, and in helping the young people to open crackers and dress the great table and prepare jellies and mince-pies Yvonne seemed to lose for a time the cloud that over-hung her.

### 2

She had never seen the farmhouse in the guise it wore at tea-time. Dusk had already come, and lamps were lit, their lights glimmering in the polished furniture and tea utensils, and a gay company sat round the board.

"Well, 'ere's to all on y', a merry Christmas an' a 'appy an' prosperous New Year!" cried Father John, after grace. "'Elp y'selves, an' dunna stand on ceremony!"

"It's about the biggest gatherin' there's ever bin 'ere, ain't it?" said Farmer James. "I never remember seein' the place so packed." Farmer John nodded, smiling happily. "Who's that red-faced chap down theer with the specs?"

"Erb Boulger." whispered Farmer John. "Dunna y'

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remember 'im? 'Is mother used to be Alice Jones at school. Ae's got the lads that shop at 'Endiford. That's 'is young leddy with 'im "

"Come, my lass " (to Yvonne), "what'll y' teck?" said Aunt Deborah.

They stared at Yvonne. She smiled. "Anything, madame, thank you," she said, and covert glances were cast at her again and again as the meal proceeded. Yvonne knew this, and endeavoured to inspire herself, but bitterness would conquer her. She was just a human girl, after all, and although she had shown almost super-human adaptability, she had reached the point where the farm and its occupants were almost offensive to her thoughts. It is useless trying to be happy, she thought, when your head seems blank, and you feel like a lamp from which the light has been withdrawn. . . .

"What ur could do with is a good glass o' port!" said Granny Phyllis shortly. "The poor lassie's lookin' bad as can be. 'Avena y' got a bottle in the 'ouse, our Deb?"

The question was spoken mischievously, of course. "No, course not!" said Aunt Deborah, glaring at her mother. "There's bin enough trouble caused by that pison already."

Johnny looked down. Mr. Redfin, who had looked up at Granny's question, smiled secretly to himself. . . .

"Pass that babby, Martha!" said Mr. Redfin, from the bottom of the table. "I'll gi'e it a nuss." And after the red morsel had been placed upon his knee: "Ae's a good un, ae is!" said Mr. Redfin, nearly dropping the baby. And to the company at large: "Ae can talk almost, y' know. . . . Y' watch me! . . . Didums wantums dummy den?" he demanded of the baby, and shook it slightly so that it emitted a dour sound of protest. "There, what did I tell y'!" And then the baby began to cry. "Come on, then, y' daddy 'll gi'e y' a bit o' b'iled 'am!" he said.

"Teck that kid off 'im afore ae over-balances, Martha!" said Granny Phyllis, while Aunt Deborah snorted and went round to take the baby. And then the

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company, who had been staring at the strange sight of the big baby and the little man, returned to their meal, and there were polite offers of cake and preserve and jelly and mince-pies, while ever and anon there came a great horse-laugh from Erb Boulger, who was talking ribaldly to Sylvester and Johnny Waters.

"'Ere it is!" said Erb, producing a scrap of mistletoe, and in a moment the three young men had leaped to their feet, and the table was in a commotion.

"No! Not if y'd crown me!" cried Miss Twitten, covering her hard mouth with her hands. "No! . . . No! . . . No! . . ." They kissed her in her turn, and she sat up and smiled happily upon the company. Yvonne caught their shy, questioning glances that invited her to be happy, and when her turn came for the mistletoe she denied the young men their kisses, and a faint flush came into her cheeks as they held her arms, in country sport, and made their salutes.

"It is necessary that we, also, take the mistletoe!" she cried to Belle, and in a trice the pair had possessed themselves of mistletoe from the walls, and were paying back the men in their own coin. Aunt Deborah breathed in relief, and kissed Yvonne warmly.

"No y' dunna!" snorted Granny Phyllis to Erb Boulger. "I'm past that sort o' thing, young man!"

"Dunna y' be shy, my gel!" said Erb Boulger, with a chuckle of delight.

"You've got to be kissed!" cried Mr. Redfin.

"Eh?"

He abased himself.

"Give me the mistletoe, Herb," said Johnny, and forced the old lady to be kissed, which she did with shrill squeaks of laughing protest, and Farmer John gallantly came round and kissed her, while Jack was whispering shyly in Marion Briscoe's ear.

"More tea?" asked Gladys May, with a dog's glance at the mistletoe, and there was a made chase after the fluffy-haired beauty into the scullery, where she was captured and forced to pay duty.

"Oh, gi'e me that mistletoe!" cried Miss Twitten.

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"Mind, Sammy, that baby's eatin' the spoon!" cried Aunt Martha.

"Dang the—ae's all right!" said Mr. Redfin, hurrying out after the young men and Gladys May.

"Well, I dunna know!" said Aunt Deborah. "Did y' ever see such goin's on?" Her glance was upon Yvonne, who smiled. "A cup o' tea, my lass? . . . I reckon I'd better get it meself."

The young men, returning, met her at the door, and as they seated themselves about the table a resounding smack came from the scullery.

"That'll learn y'!" said Gladys May hotly, and Mr. Redfin crawled in beneath Aunt Deborah's eye. One side of his cheek bore a red mark where Gladys May's hand had castigated him.

"Sammy!" murmured Aunt Martha weakly, while Granny Phyllis cackled like a hen.

Mr. Redfin stroked his great moustache, and looked glumly down his nose.

### 3

After the table had been cleared in the parlour games were played, and then Mr. Redfin said: "What about a little dance?" He fluttered on his toes down the room, for he was an habitu  of the Crawford dance-hall, which was a barn. "I've got me pickerlow." And he put a black, shining instrument under his moustache, and, waving his hand gracefully, blew the first notes of "*Abe, my Boy.*"

Aunt Deborah stopped him, and Yvonne, the glad light dying from her eyes, stared helplessly. "No dancin' to-day!" said Aunt Deborah grimly. "Nor ribald songs an' such. This is the Lord's Day. If y' can play a carol or a 'ymn, play 'em."

"Righto!" he said, and swaying backwards and forwards upon the carpet, he played in doleful way "*The day Thou gavest, Lord is ended.*" After which he "did the bagpipes" and "Somebody Treadin' On The Cat's Tail" (his strong suits), before he could be stopped.

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"Sing something, Marion, please," said Mrs. Briscoe, and Marion fetched her roll of music, while Jack opened the wheezy harmonium. While Marion was singing her first song, Sylvester noticed Yvonne leave the parlour unobtrusively, and he followed her.

She stood in the passage, her head leaning against the door, her hands up to her face.

"What is it, *chérie*?" he asked hoarsely, his heart aching for her.

"*Rien. Rien du tout!*" she muttered, and would not let him touch her. So they stood, in wretched silence, while from the parlour Marion's clear young voice continued her song: "*Ave Maria.*" And beginning to understand, he saw that Yvonne's shoulders shook with convulsive sobs.

"Yvonne!" he pleaded.

"No, do not touch me! Go, or they will follow!" she said, and went into the dark kitchen, where Gaffer sat obstinately alone, with a paper cap stuck ludicrously upon his greying yellowish-white hair. Sylvester would have followed, but his name was called, and he turned with a sigh into the parlour, his head swimming with anguished thought.

"We're going to play Postman's Knock!" cried Belle. "Where's Yvonne,"

"She's coming in a minute," he said dazedly.

"I'll be the postman;" cried Mr. Redfin, and forthwith he was installed in the passage, while Erb Boulger was sent with him.

"Miss Ethel Tavernor!" whispered Erb to Mr. Redfin.

"MISS HETHEL TAVERNOR!" bawled Mr. Redfin into the parlour, and Erb's young lady went into the passage to be kissed. When they returned Yvonne came with them, and Sylvester noticed that her look was very bright and very hard, as it had been upon that awful night after the smashing of the lorry. And when she took a seat beside him, and answered a question from Farmer John, he heard her laugh in a way that jangled his nerves.

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"MISSUS HEVON DAWE!" bawled Mr. Redfin, and Sylvester explained.

"But yes, with pleasure!" she said in that hard new voice. And when she got into the passage she found Johnny Waters waiting for her. They kissed, smiling at each other while Mr. Redfin squinted through a crack and decided to resign from the sterile position of postman.

Johnny explained what she had to do, and after a slight hesitation she called in Farmer John. She would deny Sylvester, as he denied her. . . .

As she was about to re-enter the parlour after Farmer John had kissed her: "Yvonne!" called Young Jack from the scullery.

She crossed the dark kitchen, where Gaffer sat so stolidly, and in the candle-light saw Jack and Marion and Gladys May bending above a black board bearing little knobs and a crystal glinting under glass. Marion took a pair of head-phones off her head and placed them upon Yvonne's bobbed, chocolate-coloured hair. Yvonne listened, and then sound grew and she heard the beat and swaying rhythm of a jazz band, as if it might have been the Rue Rochecouart. A little smile came to her cheeks. It was like listening to the gaiety of the world through a chink in the prison wall. The smile left her lips, and a shudder passed over her.

"Are you cold?" asked Marion solicitously.

"A little," she said.

There were cries from the kitchen, and Jack walked in with the candle, the rest following curiously. The whole party were staring at Mr. Redfin, who faced them, standing before Gaffer Johnny.

"What 're y' doin' to 'im?" asked Aunt Deborah.

"Nothin'. It's only a little trick, like," he said. "Now you just watch! Y' see, Gaffer's got to 'ide it—well, I 'id it for 'im, 'bein' as 'ow ae didna want to get out on 'is chair . . . an' I've got to find it in three guesses——!"

Johnny guffawed, and Sylvester strode across to Gaffer John, who sat calmly smoking, his ox-like gaze upon the



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little man who had been trying to talk to him while the young people kissed.

"No, wait a bit——!" began Mr. Redfin. "Now, Gaffer, is it 'ere?" he demanded.

Gaffer eyed him obstinately. Aunt Deborah, striding forward, lifted a ragged cap from Gaffer's head, and a hen's egg rolled upon the floor.

It was some time before her wrath was restored, and Granny Phyllis rated the little man, who stood in disappointed fashion muttering vague sneers about "sp'bil-sports."

But after the game had been resumed Mr. Redfin found a consolation for Gaffer John, a consolation that Gaffer understood without explanation. Yvonne, crossing the kitchen to return to the parlour, saw Mr. Redfin furtively pour out a glass of some dark crimson liquid into a glass, and Gaffer John gulped in great gulps, a light in his eye.

"It is wine?" she asked quickly.

"Sh! . . . Port!" he said, with a furtive glance at the kitchen door, from behind which came cries for "Sammy." "'Ere, get y' a glass, quick!"

When he had scurried into the passage, Yvonne reached a glass and poured out wine from a flat bottle that Mr. Redfin had placed beneath the table. She sighed, as if in relief, after the drink, and found Gaffer's slow leer upon her. Ah, what did it matter? What did anything matter? Life was a black nightmare, and there was only one thing to do, to laugh at it! After all, one might as well take the pleasures of the moment, for the old bright days of careless pleasure were gone. . . . And a spirit of perversity came oddly upon her. They imprisoned her, they forbade her wine, and cigarettes and dances and laughter and . . . they forbade her everything, particularly that Aunt Deborah. Everything! Ah, why not pay them back in their own coin? . . . What matter who was hurt? . . . And fiercely she put down the glass, and hurried up to her room. They should not keep her so guarded without payment.

They were playing hunt the slipper when she entered

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the parlour, but quickly the game was abandoned, and everyone stared at her. For she wore her ballet dress of ivory silk, and her long, lithe limbs were clad in silk stockings; there was an artificial rose in her hair, and a cigarette in her lips.

"*Voilà!*" she said, in a bitter voice, and danced a *pas seul* before their frozen faces.

"Yvonne!" said Sylvester, striding to her. This was the Yvonne of the Hill, but how changed! Her eyes were underlined with curves like bruises, and there was bitter pain in them.

"Ah, do not interrupt me! I dance, see!" she said.

Aunt Deborah rose, and a dead silence fell upon the company.

"What's the meanin' o' this, y' shameless 'ussy?" demanded Aunt Deborah, in a voice that cut the silence like the whistle of a sword. Her face was alight with shocked resentment, and the little nerve beside her mouth twitched violently. In her eyes Yvonne read bitter hatred.

"This? It is I, madame!" she said, and laughed recklessly at their shocked faces. "I come to dance! You think that my legs, they are very nice, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"Get out o' the room, afore I forget what day it is, an' who y' are! Get out o' the sight o' decent folk!"

"No, madame, I stay here," said Yvonne, calmly seating herself upon the edge of the table, and swinging her feet.

"Well, did y' ever!" cried Aunt Kate, a giggle in her voice. Farmer James chuckled, his heavy look resting greedily upon the girl's legs.

"Sylvester, teck ur off, afore I strike ur!" commanded Aunt Deborah, in an awful voice, and at once everybody began to speak. Belle and Sylvester hurried to Yvonne's side, while Ethel Tavernor glanced with up-lifted eyebrows at her young man.

"Yvonne——?" began Sylvester.

"Ah, I care not!" she replied, blowing a cone of

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smoke at the ceiling. "Ah, yes! I know! One does not dress so! One does not show one's legs *comme ça*! One must not do this and one must not do that!" It was a bare defiance to them all. "But what do I care? It is not for me as for you! And I thank God that it is so, for were I as you I would throw myself into the river!"

"That'll do!" cried Aunt Deborah, beside herself with rage. "That——!"

"It will not!" said Yvonne, and for the first time the big, grim woman and the slender, beautiful girl—the one angered beyond control, the other half mad with grief and bitter humiliation—faced each other in open enmity. "You live like dead people! You have not of friendship and of love! You think always of the failings and faults of other people, and . . . *ah, mon Dieu!* What are you yourselves, with your Bibles and your chapels and your——!"

"Silence!" shouted Aunt Deborah.

"Yvonne——?" began Sylvester, his heart torn for her.

"Ah, you like it not that I say these things, madame?" she asked scornfully. She half shrugged, raising one shoulder as she turned away from the fierce, grim woman. "I care not——!"

"Yvonne, my little lass!" pleaded Granny Mary, with tears in her eyes. Granny Phyllis grinned in her seat beside the harmonium. "Do come away upstairs an' teck them things off!"

"I go, Granny!" she said carelessly. "And I return not. I go to bed, to forget you all! Thank God that one may sleep! And I wish you a ver' good Christmas and a glad—oh, so glad, New Year!"

And sweeping them a dancer's low bow she walked splendidly out.

But as she passed Gaffer John in the passage tears rained down her cheeks.

Gaffer entered, his stomach advancing before him, his feet shuffling, his face shining with a ruddy glow, in his ox-eyes a dreadful light of mirth.

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*"I tewk ur to church,  
An' gied ur a buss!"*

he sang in a quavering voice.

*"An married ur without more fuss.  
An' there's many a mon  
Might ha' done much wuss  
Than a simple country GAW-by!"*

### 4

*Shameless!*

The word recurred again and again to the mind of Aunt Deborah as she lay in bed that night, her heart hot against the girl. Oh, there was no gettin' over it! No, not this time! Yvonne 'ad showed 'em that ur cared naught for modesty an' decent behaviour. . . . A painted harlot! . . .

To act so before the family and strangers! To come down like that, 'alf paked! It was an insult to ur an' to the 'ouse, an' a bigger insult to God! Oh, yes, this must be stopped. Aunt Deborah had been too lenient. She 'ad played with sin, an' now sin capered in all its leering ugliness upon ur own parlour floor, with all the relatives lookin' on! Oh, it was a come-down! It topped it up proper, this did! There must be no more thought o' pity. The path o' duty was straight in front on ur! There must be a stern face an' a 'ard 'eart! . . . What could y' do with a wench like that? Why, the very Beelzebub 'imself must be in ur! But it 'ad got to stop! . . . Yes! . . . Just when they was gettin' along so nice, too! . . . But no more o' that. . . .

Oh, God, 'elp me to do my duty, not 'arshly, but with no foolish thoughts to me own feelings! . . . Oh, God, y'know 'ow I 'ave tried to love the wench, y'know that I would ha' done much for ur! . . . But, oh, God, y' see what it comes to! . . . Oh, God, meck ur repent, that I can love ur again! . . . But strengthen me to do

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my duty, whatever 'appens. . . . Oh, God, I pray thee let ur repent, that I can love ur again. . . . Amen.

And in the next room Sylvester and Yvonne lay in broken silence, Yvonne's eyes half closed, her face very pale. She would not hear a word that he would say, and her tears were ended. There was nothing more to do, she thought. The world was dead. Her life was at an end, and Berthe, Paris and all the gay ones, they were just dream fragments that came to torment. And Sylvester? What was Sylvester but a fatuous mouth? He was not the Sylvester of the old days. But had there been any old days, or had she dreamed it? No, he was changed. He did not look or speak or act like the old Sylvester. And one day she had been up into the old den above, where now the young men kept their farming books, and she had seen that the painted figure had been scraped clean from the wall. So died the old Sylvester, and it was useless for this futile mouth to speak of love. . . .

She hated them all !

Yet that was not true. She hated none of them, not even that horrible Aunt Deborah. What was it, then? "

Ah, what matter? Let the mouth talk, and let the empty hours pass.

Sleep would come at last.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### BLACK FEBRUARY

#### I

"I THINK y'd better teck it easy this mornin', Yvonne," said Aunt Deborah. "If I was you I should go an' lie down."

"It is not necessary," said Yvonne coolly.

They stood in the dark kitchen, their faces lit by the ghastly reflected light from the snow outside.

"H'm!" said Aunt Deborah angrily, her heart troubled by the girl's pale face and ringed eyes and fluttering fingers. "But I think it *is* necessary, so just you go an' lie down! It isna right for y' to be knockin' about 'ere, you so near y' time."

They stared queerly at each other.

"It matters not," said Yvonne in her own tongue. This was the refuge she had adopted from Aunt Deborah since Christmas. It always irritated aunt; it sounded so much like swearing.

"Talk what I can understand, please!" she said sharply, her lids narrowing angrily about her brilliant grey eyes. Yvonne defied her in these days, and smoked her cigarette, and was bitterly cold to them all. "If that's y' manners then dunna recommend me to the French for 'em!"

"There, there, dunna 'ave words," pleaded Granny Mary. "Deary me, what a gloomy mornin' it is. An' snowin' again, too. Young Jack'll catch 'is death o' cowl out in them pcns."

"But ur ought to lie down," reasoned Aunt Deborah. "Ur ought to think o' the child." She glanced round to see if Belle had heard the words, but Belle was helping Gladys May in the scullery. And hardly, striving to

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infuse anger into her voice: "It isna ur I'm thinkin' on."

Yvonne smiled.

"Dunna y' think——?" began Granny Mary to her. "After all, there's no call for y' to be 'ere, an' we must think about the—the new-comer."

"Oh, the child? But a child more or less, what is it?" she asked in a spirit of perversity that had marked all she had done since Christmas.

"H'm!" snorted Aunt Deborah. "You just talk with a bit o' decency! Course, it isna more than we could expect on y'! But you just remember as children are God-given, an' must so be received!"

"God is a strange Giver," said Yvonne.

"What?"

"Did you not hear? This God of yours, what is He? He gives children to you? Then He gives gifts that we do not desire. And sometimes he sends them blind, and sometimes strange in their heads, and sometimes deformed. . . . I say He is a queer Giver, this God of yours."

Aunt Deborah glared at the girl. "An' y' call y'self a Christian!" she said with intense feeling. "A Catholic, o' course! . . . I wonder if y' mother felt like that about you?"

And at the words Yvonne's heart seemed to break. She drew herself up, trembling and pale. "My mother? . . . Oh, she enjoyed herself, no doubt, like you and the rest of the world, and I was the unhappy consequence!"

Aunt Deborah started, knowing that Belle had heard the indecent words. Then she struck the pale girl on the mouth.

Yvonne stood very still, her face ghastly in the February light, her lips almost transparently pale.

"Oh, mother, what——?" began Belle, starting to Yvonne's side.

"What y' done?" cried Granny Mary angrily, and Aunt Deborah felt the nightmare fear that attends all cruelty. But what other reply was there to the

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obscene, blasphemous tongue that froze the blood in her veins?

"Madame——?" faltered Yvonne, with staring eyes. "But madame——?" And then she crumpled up in a chair beside the table, and sobbed violently.

"Y' ought to be ashamed o' y'self!" cried Granny Mary, facing Aunt Deborah like a bantam cock facing a prize-fighter. "If that's what *your* religion mecks y' do then I canna see what *you've* got to talk about! Well, I never did, to strike the lassie, knowin' all the time——!"

"What else can y' do?" demanded Aunt Deborah defensively, but with a heart torn with remorse. "What else can y' do when ur talks like that, in that shameful way? . . . I didna mean to. . . I didna mean it——!"

"Yvonne, come and lie down, my dear!" said Granny Mary to Yvonne, whom Belle was holding fiercely. "Let me teck y' away from ur, what calls urself a Christian woman!"

"Ah, say not so!" whispered Yvonne, with a face like a dying girl. "It is not her fault only, my dear Granny! But I will lie down, I think, for I am very tired——" And she slipped from their arms, fainting as they caught her. . . .

When they had gone upstairs with her Aunt Deborah stood in silence upon the strip of matting before the fire. Her grim mouth trembled, and it was all that she could do to hold her red hands still. "God forgi'e me, God forgi'e me," ran the words through her dazed mind. "Oh, God, forgi'e me . . . if Y' can. . . ."

### 2

They brought Yvonne down for tea, but she would take nothing to eat, although they had cooked pancakes for her, and inserted in each, in Crawford custom, a tiny lump of snow. She sat listlessly, and when Aunt Deborah fussed awkwardly about her she motioned her off, as if even words were wearisome to her. "It is not



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necessary," she said again and again in a querulous voice. They saw that her defiant spirit had fled, that she was broken and tremulous.

But whatever unhappiness there may be there is always work to be done, and Aunt Deborah and Granny Mary went out to the yard, where in the dusky afternoon light a couple of men talked with Jack. Yvonne sat on, Belle's arm about her, her mind swaying again and again towards the gulf of insensibility, her nerves awake with terror.

"Oh!" said Belle suddenly in a dismayed voice. And urgently, to Yvonne: "Come with me into the garden, Yvonne! Come quickly!"

"Why, my dear—" murmured Yvonne listlessly.

But she was answered as she spoke. From the yard came the grunting and preliminary squealing of a pig about to be killed. "Ah, *mon Dieu!* What is it?" she demanded in alarm, starting up.

"Come with me, quickly!" said Belle, hurrying her into the passage. "No, through the front door! Quick!"

The front door was locked and bolted, and Belle hastily turned the key. There was silence in the yard. Then, just as the door rasped as she tugged at the handle, there arose a long, despairing squeal from the yard, a squeal that suddenly was choked, to break out into a roar of awful, anguished terror. . . .

"Ah, *mon Dieu!* Ah, *mon Dieu!*" panted Yvonne, like one in a nightmare.

"Come!" said Belle, almost dragging her into the front garden.

But there the squealing followed them, and she helped the reeling girl out into the lane, and they staggered along towards the village, Yvonne's slippered feet stumbling in the snow, her pale face void of all but terror.

They rested for a time on the bridge over the Abbey river, and then Yvonne discovered that the horrible sound had ceased, that over the white, dark country-side there was no sound but the cawing of rooks and the gurgling

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of the icy water below her. Belle's strong arm was about her, a shelter and protection that felt like the arm of God in the anguish of the silence. Then they returned to the house, Yvonne as if in pain.

Belle had to meet Johnny Waters in the village after tea, so that Yvonne was left with the old people, for Sylvester was at the shop in Hendiford, and Young Jack had gone to meet Marion Briscoe. Each of the young people, Jack and Belle, had offered to take Yvonne with them, but she was in no mood for excursions.

Granny Mary tried to get her to knit, to read, to eat nuts, to do anything rather than sit so still, her hands upon her lap, her look upon the fire. But Yvonne was in no mood for responding to Granny's kindness. Thoughts would obtrude now, like carrion crows after the kill. She had striven to retain her proud spirit, to scorn them, to fight her fight gallantly, without humiliation; she had struggled valiantly, like a bird held in the hand. But now exhaustion left her panting in subjection. She was beaten. . . .

And, oh, how the horrible house oppressed her, like a close, foul prison. There was an air of lassitude about the room, and about its occupants. Granny Mary knitting on so sedately, a nut in her mouth, Aunt Deborah reading out of God's Book, a frown of thought upon her brow, and Gaffer John, who had spent a month in bed after his Christmas frolic, sitting so still, his immobility acting subtly upon the hysterical nerves of Yvonne. There was no humour in Gaffer for her in these days; he was merely typical of the countryside, she thought, ugly, old, remote from outward appearance, obstinate and brainless beneath, with one knows not what horrors lurking in the dark corners of his tranced brain. No, there was nothing beautiful in this cold northern land. Once she had seen beauty and goodness, beautiful traits of character and beautiful colourings in the countryside, but one by one the lights had gone out from her life; she began to feel a sensation as if a coffin lid were closing upon her. She was alone, deserted even by Sylvester, who was gradually becoming a clod, she thought; the

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countryside seemed to exude a deathly, deadening miasma, that had assimilated Gaffer John and Farmer John, and was now assimilating Sylvester, creeping about him as if he stood unknowingly upon a quicksand. The beard she had loved, the painted gipsy on the wall, the Parisian clothes, everything. . . . He was not the Sylvester whom she had loved. . . .

She glanced about the dark kitchen. How she hated it! The grandfather clock, the prim table and its hissing lamp, the "Wedding Bells" and the "Rock of Ages" and the fatuous "GOD IS LOVE," the dark cupboards in the dark corners, the squat wooden sofa, the tick-tick-tick of the alarm clock upon the mantelpiece beneath the "GOD IS LOVE." The very chairs, it seemed, sat watching her, chairs that embodied the grim, contemptuous spirits of ancient farmers and their wives. And over there, Aunt Deborah, incarnating their spirits. . . .

She did not look at Aunt Deborah. She had studied Aunt Deborah's face until she knew every line and every crease and every promontory, every tiny variation in the dun colour of it, every change in its coarse texture. But she did not look at Aunt Deborah. She began to sense her in these days, for in her thoughts the gaunt figure loomed up like a gigantic, awful figure seen through a fog. There was nothing human about Aunt Deborah, nothing friendly about her. She was a portent, a portent of all that was horrible in life, of all the unimaginable terrors that haunt the outlands of the mind. So that Yvonne almost dared not look directly into that grim face; she sensed the older woman's presence, and went about always with her physical relation in metres from Aunt Deborah in her mind. She *hated* Aunt Deborah, hated her virtuously, as one hates evil and cruelty. And yet, in her rare moments of lucidity she had been amazed at the revelation that Aunt Deborah was not at the root of her trouble, that there was something else . . . that Aunt Deborah was kindly and loving in her heart, and Yvonne had ascribed her trouble and the tragic failure of her marriage to England and the strange house and the

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strange tongue, the horrible weather, the slavery to the *ménage*, Sylvester's failures to take her back to Paris to meet Berthe and all her friends, to the lack of amusements in the village, to the foreign minds and foreign acts of the people of the farm, and to all the little puzzling, whispered and glanced injunctions and condemnations. In those moments she had been convinced that Aunt Deborah was guiltless, but the moments had grown rarer, until now she believed that upon Aunt Deborah's shoulders rested all the responsibility for the black horror of her life. . . .

And the child? The thought brought a lump into her throat. Soon, perhaps in a month's time, she would be the mother of Sylvester's child. Her eyes grew moist with poignant pity as she thought of the little one who was soon to be born under such a roof. . . . But perhaps she herself would not be there to see it in its misery. Oh, God and Mother Mary, protect the child from them! Let not Aunt Deborah oppress it!

"There's the postman, late agen," said Granny Mary, raising her head.

A motor-cycle engine was purring in the lane. Then came a knock at the door.

"Madame Hevon Dawe," said the postman, and Yvonne, rising with a fluttering heart, saw the familiar blue stamps bearing the sower, and the handwriting of Berthe. It was reassuring to see the writing, for one knew not what might happen.

"MY DEAR SISTER,—I send you this little note to tell you that I am expecting to present Anatole with his baby sometime on Tuesday or Wednesday" (it was Tuesday to-day, Yvonne thought), "and I will write you again as soon as I am recovered. But do not be alarmed, my dear. I am sure that there will be nothing to alarm yourself about.

"According to your letter your child will be a month younger than my own. So that in combats mine will win, *chérie*! But let us hope they will be good comrades, as their mothers have been.

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"How are you, *mignon*? I did not like your last letter; it was so short and so uninformative that it was useless, except for the fact that it had been written by my dear sister. Really, I am beginning to believe that you are not happy, *petite*. You say that you would not have been able to come to Paris even had we not been coming? What is holding you, then? Sylvester, he is willing? Is it money?"

"Write to me, my dear. You cannot know how uneasy your letters leave me. Remember me in your prayers on Tuesday night.—Your loving sister,

"BERTHE."

To-night? . . .

She glanced about her like a trapped animal.

"What's the matter, my love?" asked Granny Mary, solicitously taking the girl's hand. "Not bad news?"

"No, Granny," she said. "But my sister Berthe . . . to-night she expects her child. . . . And I am here! *Oh, mon Dieu*, save her, save her!" she cried in her own tongue, her pale face pitiable in its distress, as Granny Mary took her into her arms.

"There, there, ur 'll be alright, you see," murmured Granny Mary. "And at Easter Sylvie will take y' back to ur, an' you'll 'ave y' own little darlin' to show ur. Dunna cry, my lass!"

"Ah, I am lost!" muttered Yvonne. "Ah, my dear sister! Berthe, my dear! . . . And I am here, and cannot come to you! . . . Ah, *mon Dieu, mon Dieu!* . . ."

"Sit down, my little lass!" said Granny Mary, with streaming eyes. "Sit down! Y' binna very well, an' it's upset y'. . . . But y' mustna worry. The good God 'as ur safe in 'Is keepin'. There, dunna cry, dunna cry, my little lass!"

"You're worryin' for nothin'," said Aunt Deborah, and at the sound of her hard voice Yvonne started. "Y' want to be calm, 'cause nothin' can go wrong wi' ur. . . . It's just you y'self feelin' bad, my dear."

But Yvonne did not reply. Gradually, as peace descended upon the kitchen, a new thought had come to

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her. Why had she not thought of it before? Sylvester was there, in Hendiford . . . and she knew the way. . . . He said there were profits, that the business was prospering, that he would have plenty of money for Easter. . . . Why not now? Why not to-night? But if she spoke one word they would stop her. Aunt Deborah would see her victim escaping. No, she must creep out after they had gone to bed. . . . And a load seemed lifted from her mind.

She would speak to them calmly, so that they would not suspect. She must play her part calmly, or Aunt Deborah might . . . might kill her. . . . Oh, Berthe, Berthe! . . . But she must be calm. She must think of nothing but her escape. . . . Ah, why had she not thought of it before?

"I am better now," she said.

They stared at her, the big, grim woman and the little, bunched old lady. Yvonne glanced away from Aunt Deborah's stare.

"That's right," said Granny Mary, with intense relief. She came over and kissed the girl. "That's the way to be a brave little lassie!"

"That's good," said Aunt Deborah, but hesitated over her next words, and finally became silent again. She was thinking of some way in which she might atone for her horrible act of the morning.

"Yes, I feel better, and only a little weak, Granny Mary," said Yvonne. "But I know that . . . that my sister will be safe now."

"Course ur will!" said Granny Mary.

And silence came upon the dark little kitchen again. Once or twice Yvonne sensed that Aunt Deborah was glancing furtively, hungrily at her. Gloating, no doubt. Noting the progress of her illness. But she had fooled Aunt Deborah nicely. . . . To-night, as soon as she could. . . . It would be cold, but she must wrap up. Nothing must stop her. This was her last night beneath the rod of Aunt Deborah's cruelty. And exultation came to her, that left her, at the thought of Berthe, feeling faint and sick. . . . And, of course, she *was* ill, she admitted to herself. If she looked long at one spot there appeared little

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whirling windmills of light, that turned her dizzy until she closed her eyes. And her fingers trembled distressfully, while her head seemed light. . . . Yes, she was ill. And she must take no chances with the cold, both for her own sake and for the sake of the baby. . . . Berthe ! Berthe ! Oh, my dear sister, I am coming ! . . .

### 3

The house was silent at ten o'clock, and she waited, listening to hear the snoring of Aunt Deborah. But Aunt Deborah lay awake, the devil of remorse biting into her brain. She, who so hated cruelty, had been cruel that day, brutally cruel.

Yvonne roused herself at half-past ten, and drew on coat and muffler and gloves over her indoor clothes (for she had not undressed), and taking her shoes in her hand, and under her arm a little parcel holding Berthe's letters and her jewellery and little keepsakes from Jean and Marthe and the rest, she crept down the stairs, her heart leaping at every creak, and into the dark kitchen, so supernaturally quiet in the firelight. Ragged moonlight fell through the window upon the alarm clock and the pale colours of the card, "GOD IS LOVE," above the mantelpiece, and the cat slept on beside the fire. Four dreads came to her then : that Gaffer's spirit might be sitting leering at her from the empty armchair, that Aunt Deborah might awake and kill her, that she might encounter the dead body of the pig, and that there might be rats, with which the farm swarmed, in the courtyard.

She looked round upon the squab and the crimson-clothed table and the inglenook and the evil cupboards, at the little fire dancing upon the hearth, and at the dim pictures and that tawdry mockery, "GOD IS LOVE," and at the sleeping grandfather clock, whose white face seemed to her affrighted nerves to resemble the spirit of Gaffer John. She shuddered. The little dark room, with its low ceiling, was warm and close, and upon the air

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lingered a faint sickening scent of Farmer's asthma tobacco. She crept out into the passage, and hoped that never more might she enter there.

Softly she unbolted and unlocked the back door, and shut it furtively behind her. It was snowing slightly, and the moon shone through the snow, irradiating the world with a wonderful light. She glanced about her in dread of the rats, and ploughed through the snow that lay thick upon the courtyard. But it was cold, this air, she thought, wrapping her muffler closely about her, and shuddering. Yet what did cold or anything matter? She was going to Berthe, over there, far to the south, behind the wild scurry of snow over Ruggenham, to a warmer land where hearts were kindly and laughter was upon every lip and the sun laughed, too, where Berthe lay, perhaps in pain. . . .

She sped down the drive, and the gate creaked behind her. But they should not catch her now! No, they should not catch her now! She stole one glance at the grim house, that stood whitely like "Old Hiems" in the moonlit snow, and then sped off down the lane. . . . The pig! *Ah, mon Dieu*, what a nightmare her life had been! But now she was free, and Aunt Deborah might shake her red talons in vain!

The world was a white wilderness underlined with black shadows, and gaunt branches, that had once been banners of summer's glory, pointed condemnatory fingers at her from aloft. They seemed to embody the spirit of Aunt Deborah, the spirit of England, so cold and cruel and prejudiced and stupid, with a tag of Scripture to carry it over all morally doubtful places. Ah, she hated it!

Her limbs were unusually light, she thought, her feet unusually heavy in the snow. She must not hurry, for then faintness might overcome her, and Berthe would be left alone in her trouble. Oh, my dear Berthe, I am coming. I am coming!

The village was like a dead place, its dead windows glimmering eerily in the moonlight, its thatch overhung with snow. Here and there a light leaped from a dying fire upon the window, and at one house there were lights



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above and below, for Old Mobberley, the gossip, had come to his last revelation. She sped on, thinking of Berthe and of her exultant escape.

Then the village was left behind, and she went out into the white road that wound down into the darkness towards Ruggenham. Oh, it was time Sylvester came! He was late. . . . And the lane was dark and uninviting, overhung by gaunt branches that were twisted into diabolical shapes in the moonlight. Oh, she did not like the road, even if it *did* lead to Berthe! Oh, Mary Mother, guard and protect me from evil spirits! . . .

### 4

An hour later Sylvester, returning in the Ford, was hailed by the hostess of the Bull and Spectacles.

"Your little missus is 'ere, a'most off ur 'ead!" she said.

"What?"

"Your wife! Ur come stumbling into the door after we'd gone to bed!" she replied. "Ur looks as if ur's got a fever or summat!"

He leaped down, his heart in his mouth. Yvonne here? At this time of night? What could have happened?

He felt very sick as he followed her into the kitchen. Mr. Tunney and Alice, the maid, were attending to Yvonne's needs. She was talking deliriously in French upon the couch, her white face mad with anguish. . . .

"Berthe, my sis'er, oh, Berthe, they will not let me come! . . . And it is so cold, and I cannot move, my sister! Ah, you must travail and die, not knowing how I loved you and how I died! . . . Ah, my dear sister! . . . Berthe, they have killed me! . . . She has killed me, my sister! . . . *Ah, mon Dieu!* Save me, save me!" . . .

"Yvonne!" he said, in a broken voice, dropping upon his knees beside her, while they stared at him and at her face speaking poignant French. "Yvonne, what's the matter? Yvonne, my dear?"

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Her eyes came round to him, and her brain seemed to grow less restless. She smiled, and tears came through the smile. "Sylvie, oh, Sylvie!" she cried to him, and he folded her in his arms. But he found that she was talking strangely to him, of the pig and of Aunt Deborah and of Berthe, and of the cold night and the necessity for haste if they were to be in France before morning. . . .

"Why, my dear, what is the matter?" he pleaded.

"Ur's feelin' bad," said Mrs. Tunney. "Best place for ur is bed, an' a doctor to ur, particularly in ur condition."

"No, no, I do not desire to go to bed!" cried Yvonne, in alarm. "Ah, Sylvie, save me! Berthe, she is in pain! She suffers, and I am here! . . . Oh, take me to her! We shall be too late, too late——!"

"Bed's the place for ur," said Mrs. Tunney again. "Ur's welcome to stop 'ere, if y' like, as y' know."

"No; I'll wrap her up and take her back home!" he said. "Can you lend me a couple of blankets?"

"Sylvie, no, no! Do not take me back, ah, do not take me back, my husband!" cried Yvonne frenziedly. She was semi-delirious. "Ah, Sylvester, you could not take me back there! She will kill me! . . . And Berthe, my sister——! Ah, she will kill me, she will kill me!" She fell back, fainting, on the bed.

And as she lay upon the arm of Alice, the maid, in the cab of the lorry, with blankets swathed about her, her lips moaning faintly—for she had recovered consciousness—he drove back up the road towards the village, and swore that he would take her back to France, if he had to starve when they got there. First, this child . . . and afterwards, France, and she should never return to England. . . . God, what a criminal brute he had been!

As they approached the house Yvonne moaned, already feeling its black fingers upon her heart.

## CHAPTER XXV

### TRAVAIL

#### I

UPON a night early in March, Yvonne sat alone in her bedroom, striving hard to forget the fact that Sylvester was not in the house, that he was at the shop ten miles away, that he would not be back before eleven-thirty. It was a wild March night, the blackness outside clamorous with wind, that wailed about the chimneys, rising and falling in irritable fashion, with brief, tense, trying lulls between the movements. Everybody was in bed. Not a door seemed to fit, but in answer to the diabolical call of the wind they kept up a drumming undertone that tightened Yvonne's nerves to screaming point. . . .

She had got out of bed, in an effort to escape thought, and walked slowly over to the window that looked over the Abbey river and the Home Field and Lovers' Lane. But nothing was to be seen, nothing but fleeting clouds and the black, wild night, and upon the window, dim and white in the candle-light, flakes of snow melted. She watched them, striving to repel thought, watched them as they fell against the warm glass, to cling, to sparkle, and then to slowly disintegrate, like fair souls turned to tears. That Aunt Deborah, and the mouth, so grim. . . . But no, she must not think about her. She must think about Berthe and Paris and the little one soon to be, of Berthe's child and of Easter and her return. . . . Vain, vain! All such thoughts were stale and unprofitable, and only one thought would hold her in its intense, terrifying grip. . . . And it was losing its terror, that thought. It was so natural, when you come to think about it. It

was just—— She turned away from the window in frenzied terror. . . .

Oh, if only Sylvester would come! Oh, he *must* come! She could not go on like this! She was fighting a losing fight! . . . Oh, Mother Mary, help this your child, and protect me from the terror of dark thoughts. Oh, let me sleep, let me sleep! Do not torment me more than I can bear!

She went back to the bed, and strove hard to focus her tortured brain upon thoughts of Berthe and Paris. But it was like hearing a tale that is long finished and done with and put by, and it seemed pallid beside the Thought that would assault her. Ordinarily consciousness seemed to be composed of a continuous, endless succession of seconds, each starting into vivid existence, and as quickly passing before the superimposition of the next. But now she seemed, in some curious way, to have fallen out of her proper place in time; for her no second flashed into vivid existence, and she had a curious feeling that her spirit lagged, receiving impressions at second hand, as of things recounted, not experienced. And always, tugging at her hair, it seemed, was the black Thought that had attended her during the last dark days, as she had lain in the tiny bedroom, or sat listlessly in the dark kitchen. But one must not think of such things. They made one's reason totter, they argued and persuaded and coaxed, until the mind reeled and one saw men as trees walking, and horrors dressed out in friendly guise. . . . Yet, were they horrors, after all? Were they not friends? It was so easy. . . . Many times she had remembered a little December morning scene, where in the frozen courtyard, with black shapes standing about, She had bent and caught the duck, and plunged the knife into its neck, so that the blood gushed out upon the creamy-white feathers. . . . Or had it been herself and not the duck? Had she (Yvonne) died there? . . . And how Aunt would have laughed for joy had it been Yvonne who lay there bleeding her life out! Had She laughed as She saw Yvonne lying bleeding her life out? . . . Or had it been the duck? . . . The quick motion, the sudden tearing of the skin,

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the answering rush of the blood. . . . Aunt Deborah's neck was stringier than the duck's, though. The knife would not enter so easily. It would tear the skin, and She would scream, and the prison gates would close again upon Yvonne. But it would be easily accomplished with one quick stab . . . one plunge of the knife downwards, below the wrinkled cheek, just where the bony jaw, so strong and grin, abutted on the thin, muscular neck. . . . And then Aunt Deborah would fall down, and upon her creamy-white feathers——

Ah, my God, save me, save me! Save me from myself and from Her! Ah, keep away these thoughts that bite into me like demons! Ah, my God, keep my sight clear, that I may be saved from the terror that walks in the lonely places of my brain! . . . Ah, Mary Mother, if not for my sake, for the sake of the Child!

Oh, if Sylvester would but come! He *could* not be long. . . . Oh, if he would but come! . . . Mary Mother, stand by my bed, protect me, and protect Her from the devil that tempts me! Oh, give me sleep, calm, quiet sleep, with no black thoughts to torture me and drive me out upon the wide black sea of loneliness and despair, where the hands clutch and the evil lips whisper! . . . Ah, God, save me, save me!

But the child. One must think of the child. Even if one was forced, step by step, to the brink of the flaring abyss, one must still remember the child, and fight as never mortal fought before, to retreat, inch by inch, from the horror of the Thought. . . .

The candle flared and smoked, and shadows danced about the room. Oh, if Sylvester would but come! She would try to sleep. Outside, all the world was awake, it seemed; and, inside, all lay sunk in slumber. The very house seemed to sleep in the lulls of the wind. And, oh, if but the wind would be still! There seemed a presage of horror in its fierce roar, and a wailing as of the damned in its final scream. It began on a low note, like a church organ, began in a mere whispering and muttering. Then, gathering force moment by moment, it clamoured up, all-powerful, all-destroying, until it rioted madly,

screaming and threatening upon its topmost note, that was prolonged unmercifully, while all the doors drummed with increasing noise, and all the world was one howling wilderness of mad sound. . . . And then it sank, defeated yet unsubdued, sank but to gather its forces for the next onslaught upon her heart, sank down and down with a dying murmur, while somewhere a door clanged to with angry, vindictive abruptness. . . . Oh, my God, protect me from them all! Let me sleep, let me sleep, as they are sleeping, and as She is sleeping on the other side of the wall.

Or was She not waking, planning out further devilries in company with the wind that gradually rose again like a wounded dragon? . . . Was She not rising and bending for the sharp-pointed knife? . . . But there She would be disappointed, for the knife was safe. Ah, yes, Yvonne had hidden it, down there below the little dresser, days ago. It was safe. Aunt Deborah could not harm her with the knife. . . . Aunt Deborah could not defend herself. . . . She might put up Her hands, She might kick, She might throw off the bedclothes and scream for Farmer John to awake. But it would be too late, then. The blood—

She shuddered, and crouched lower in the bed, pressing her hands to her face, and shaking her head again and again. Oh, if Sylvester would but come, if Sylvester would but come! It must be nearly eleven now. Perhaps he would not come——? One Saturday night he had not come!

She buried her head in the clothes in mortal terror. Her body felt racked beyond belief, her head was heavy, and thought pulsed through her brain like that nerve upon Aunt Deborah's lips. . . . But it would pulse no more after That. . . . She would lie still and white, and there would be a last stiff smile of defiance on Her lips. But Yvonne would have won. If she was in time. But how if it was Yvonne who lay there, with a stiff smile of defiance upon her waxy-white face? . . . One must strike first. Even *now* she might be rousing Herself in the next room. . . . There were many knives in the house, long knives and

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short knives and blunt knives and sharp knives. . . . But the sharpest was there, under the dresser. . . .

If Sylvester would but come! He would protect her from Aunt Deborah. Her lids were hot, her hands cold and heavy, and she swayed, sometimes, towards the heaven of insensibility. If Sylvester would but come! Perhaps he was coming along the Ruggenham road. Perhaps he was in the village, or even now coming up Lovers' Lane. . . . She listened, but only the threat of the wind answered her. He was not coming. He was staying all night. He was not coming. . . .

And then she started, with screaming nerves and staring eyes, her heart leaping at a sound from the next room.

What was that? . . .

She was rising. She was creeping stealthily from Farmer John's side, and Her brilliant grey eyes were alight with the triumph of culmination! She was tip-toeing to the door, and in Her hand——

No, it could not be! Perhaps She was now opening the door that led into the corridor. Yvonne listened in tense anguish. There was no sound as the wind dropped. Was She listening? Was She standing there, listening for Yvonne's breathing? The pale girl held her breath. But there was silence. Was She waiting for the wind to rise? . . . It began, in a muttering and murmuring, and a door thudded. It rose upon its strong limbs, clamouring and shouting. Now would be the moment . . . now! . . . *now!*——

But there was nothing.

Perhaps She was not there. Perhaps She lay in bed, Her grim face staring upwards towards the dark ceiling, Her great nose like a watch-tower, Her thin neck—— Ah, that was the point. That was where one might strike a doorway into deliverance. But one must be quick. The wind was growling itself into its momentary lull, and death would come upon the next onslaught. One must be quick——

She slipped from the bed, and in the lull bent before the dresser, and drew out a short, pointed knife. One

must be quick. The first mutterings of the wind came up to her. But dare she face the dark corridor? The rat! . . . Last night, when they were in bed, Sylvester had roused himself at a slight sound and had gone out, to discover an old blind rat stumbling about upon the floor. But Sylvester had killed it. And one must make haste. A door thudded and her heart leaped. No, it was the wind, slowly rising towards Death. But not her death, and the death of her child! No——

•She crept out into the corridor, where a cold wind swept past her like an evil, clammy presence. The next door. Oh, if only the wind would remain quiescent but a moment more, and the deed would be done. But it was rising! She crept down the corridor, a slender figure in white with a mad light in her eyes, and paused beside Aunt Deborah's door. . . . The wind was rising, slowly, steadily, surely it was rising, rising, rising——

And then her scream tore the silence of the sleeping house, and brought the sleepers back to waking life, their hearts throbbing, their backs cold with fright. And as they listened they heard a second scream, and then a moaning and a sobbing from the corridor.

### 2

When Sylvester arrived at eleven-thirty the house was ablaze with lights, and a low moaning came from Yvonne's room, where the district nurse and Aunt Deborah and Granny Mary attended Yvonne. Young Jack had gone off upon the motor-cycle for the village doctor, and Farmer John sat with his arm about his trembling daughter near the fire that had been kindled. They briefly explained to him, and he drew a great breath, like a man who stiffens himself before the final blow that will end the conflict.

They had found her moaning, with Granny Mary's arms round her, in the corridor, they said, and at once she had been carried to bed. The nurse said it would not be long.



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He sat down, white and silent, and abruptly got up. Inaction bit into him like a goad. He must do something, anything! How long would Jack be? . . .

"Ae's gone some time now," said Farmer John. "I 'spect the doctor is down in the village on some case. If ae isna then Jack'll 'ave to knock 'im up."

"I'll see if he's coming," said Sylvester vaguely, and went out upon the snowy drive, where the wind taunted him. He must not get alarmed and nervy. He must keep cool, for the sake of Yvonne. And for the sake of the child, too. And a little thrill of exquisite feeling ran through him at the thought of Yvonne's child; he could not tell if it was pleasurable or painful, but it tautened his muscles and made him catch his breath like a runner. But it was of Yvonne he must think, his darling, tortured Yvonne of the Hill! Oh, God, what a brute he had been!

Would Jack never come? The lane was empty and bare in its black and white winter coat, and not a sound stirred in the lulls of the wind. But he could not stand still inactive. He returned on quick feet to the house, and on entering the dark kitchen was shocked into terror to hear the sounds that came from above. Yvonne! . . .

"Sit down, lad," said Farmer John affectionately, but with trembling lips. And Belle was weeping.

He sat down and closed his eyes, trying to avoid the recurring sound. But no, he must take his punishment. He must grin and bear it. Maybe Yvonne would think, in some passing moments of relief, of him sitting there, and it would be a comfort to her. Again the sound! . . . He reeled.

A motor-cycle clattered up the drive, there was the sound of voices, and the little doctor entered, with incompetence written all over him, and Jack came behind. The doctor slipped off his coat after a brief word to them, and went off upstairs, their glances following him like the glances of dogs. He seemed foolishly unconcerned, they thought. Sylvester repressed a desire to grip him by the collar and either plead or threaten.

The sounds grew in their intensity, and suddenly

Sylvester leaped to his feet, his face aghast at the anguish of the moment. For some time he stood there, and the world seemed to roll unheedingly over centuries of time, while he was conscious only of Jack's kindly presence and of the recurring horror of the sound.

And then there was silence, like the fresh silence of the fields after rain, and only the dull clumping of feet above, and a low moaning that was scarcely distinguishable from the moaning of the wind without.

"Suddenly there were hurried movements above, and a clatter of feet on the stairs, and Granny Mary, with tears streaming down her eyes, her face looking ghastly, stumbled into the room.

"Jack! Sylvie! One of you teck this, quick, down to the surgery! Oh, quick!" she gabbled. "Oh, the little lass!"

"What—what is it?" gasped Sylvester.

But she turned away, her old face, that was now so pale, working distressfully. "Oh, my lad, oh, my lad!" she sobbed.

They were all on their feet, and the little room was vibrant with emotion.

"She is worse?" he gasped.

Granny Mary nodded, and covered her face with her hand. Young Jack was already clattering along Lovers' Lane upon the motor-cycle.

Sylvester collapsed into a chair, shaking his head in bitter grief, keeping his face hidden by his hands. And they surrounded him with comforting words and touches, but his mind was filled with black horror.

The doctor clumped downstairs with a fatuously serious face. They went to him, imploring him for comfort with mute looks. He shook his head, murmured something about the child being all right, but that . . . well . . . anything, brain fever . . . or worse. . . .

"Or worse," he said. And after a pause, and shaking a foolishly doleful head: "I'm afraid I can't hold out any hope. Any hope whatever."

"Then to hell with you!" cried Sylvester. "I'm off after the Ruggenham doctor!" And he rushed from the

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house, and in a little time they heard the Ford go roaring off down the drive.

He returned in an hour, bringing with him a tall, youngish man, with the bearing of an athlete. This was Dr. Charles from Ruggerham. The village doctor had gone.

Dr. Charles went off upstairs, and Sylvester stood at the foot, biting his nails and breathing in short gasps. But he could not stay there, when every minute he had to drag himself back from racing up to her. He turned back into the kitchen, and suddenly irritated by their faces and the cosy smugness of the place, he went out into the road, and there stared up at the yellow light that came palely from the window in the southern wing. There she lay, and death waited beside the bed! He leaned against the fence and wept bitterly, going through his Gethsemane in the cold, gusty night.

### 3

There were steps on the stairs, and Dr. Charles came down.

"Who's been looking after her?" he asked. And when they told him. "Oh, that fool!" Their faces lit up. "Well, there's no need to alarm yourselves. The poor girl is ill, that's true, but she'll be all right now."

*All right now!* The words sang themselves into their brains, and they turned and kissed and embraced one another.

"Thank you," said Sylvester quietly to Dr. Charles. His heart was too full for more words.

And the doctor went out, "like Christ," thought Sylvester, to where Young Jack waited for him with the motor-cycle and sidecar.

Sylvester sat down, and gazed weakly at them when they spoke and smiled to him. He was feeling very sick, and very happy, as if he had been upon the rack and was now subjected only to the remembered terrors of his torment.

"You get a good strong cup of tea, now, Sylvie," said Belle. And throwing her arms about his neck, she sobbed: "Oh, I love her, I love her, Sylvie!" and wept as if her heart would break.

Then Aunt Deborah descended the stairs. She had not left the bedroom since they had carried Yvonne thither. Her face was hard and cold and grim, as if she had passed through agony, and when they spoke to her she did not seem to hear them.

• Sylvester went and folded her in his arms, and then, like Belle, she wept bitterly, but not easily, as Belle had wept. Sobs shook her, as if they would break her thin, stiff figure, and her grim mouth was very pitiful to see. . . .

And upstairs Granny turned from the restless Yvonne, and pushed a bright, pointed article further beneath Yvonne's underclothes in the drawer of the dresser. She had found it under Yvonne's hand when she hurried out into the corridor, but she said no word, then or afterwards, of her find or of her thoughts.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### "NOT DEATH, BUT LOVE"

#### I

MORNING after morning Yvonne would wake in a tiny little room in the little cottage in Shooker's Lane, where they had taken her. There was a great window before her through which the sun shone, a great window edged with bright curtains, and upon its sill bearing always, it seemed, new sprays and bunches and clusters of flowers for her eye's delight. Sometimes there was a bunch of peering daffodils, and sometimes snowdrops, and sometimes glistening crocuses or yellow primroses, while Belle seemed to desire to bring into the room all the tender growths of the spring, the spear-leaves of blue-bells, and tough tendrils of honeysuckle with bunches of new leaves at intervals along their edges, and woolly, silver-grey fox-glove leaves, and ivy and frogsbit and all the wonderful catkins that were reminiscent of a day long ago, in the ages before the Horror came. And beneath the window there was a sofa with brightly-coloured cushions, and next to the sofa a little shining grate, so neat and sparkling that one might be forgiven for imagining that it had come straight from a doll's house. And next to the grate. . . . But beyond that point her mind was ignorant of the furnishing, for upon that side was her baby, her baby and Sylvester's, a tiny bundle of humanity with a queer little tilted nose and eyes of cornflower blue and lips like the tiny portals of a fairy heaven. When her glance encountered the child she would forget all else, but vaguely knew that if she turned a little to the left she would see a tiny table with *vin rouge* in a tall bottle, and bunches of grapes, that Sylvester had journeyed to Walsall to obtain. But who desired to turn farther than the little, pink, crumpled face?

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Her mind was almost blank, yet filled with a great relief, as if she had been thrown safely above the reach of the black waves. Her body seemed to absorb the sunlight, her mind the sight and scent of the flowers and of her baby. She did not desire to talk or to think. She would smile and caress the child, and answer the encouraging words of Sylvester and Belle and Granny Mary and the rest, and sometimes, even, she would laugh softly, with gaiety in her beautiful, pallid face. But then sleep would come and take her again, and even during the waking periods she was scarcely conscious. She sensed a great shadow that receded upon the horizon, a horrible shadow from which she had escaped, and she would shudder and sleep to forget it; and she vaguely seemed to remember these people who fussed around her, chief among whom was this grim woman who spoke so softly, who touched her so gently with red, calloused hands, someone whom she loved, and yet someone who had been intimately connected with the shadow. She would watch the red hands tend the baby, her baby, would feel their harsh, kindly touch upon her hair, and sometimes the owner of the hands would talk to her, talk softly, pleadingly to her just when she was on the borderline between sleep and waking. Then the face disappeared, and there came other faces and other hands, plump hands and withered hands, and red faces and old faces and young faces. Surely the faces of Belle and Granny Mary and Sylvester . . . and . . . yes, Marion Briscoe. And Willum George, of course; she had recognized him first. And there were other faces, too, faces that were vaguely familiar, but all without their corresponding names in her head, all seeming to be unrelated to actual life. But she did not worry about these vague appearances, for in her heart she was happy, happy at the near presence of her baby, happy at the touch of the sun and the feel of Sylvester's lips, happy to experience again the increasing glow of health stealing like wine through her enfeebled body, happy to be free from the black horror that disappeared, though still with power to whiten her lips, over the horizon.

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### 2

And then, one morning, she awoke and suddenly it seemed as if the wheels of the world had begun to turn again, as if she had but just awakened from weeks of sleep, as if the vague consciousness that had hitherto seemed like moments of waking had been really pleasant dreaming interludes in the blank world of her long sleep. And there, wonder of wonders, was warm sunlight lying upon her hand, and here was her baby beside her, his pink little face sleeping as he had slept during those interludes that had either been waking or sleeping. She was alive! She was happy! Her body felt strong and well again, and the world was a glorious place of sunlight and flowers! . . .

And then she became conscious of a voice that talked in aggrieved manner in the garden beyond the open door.

"Y' dunna reelly mean it, though, Belle," said the voice, a nasal voice. Surely the voice of dear Johnny Waters! "I meanersay——"

"But, Johnny, all the other men do it, an' I hope you wouldn't be ashamed of——" said Belle's voice, and suddenly hesitated.

"No, course not," said Johnny Waters, and Yvonne heard the sound of his great foot tapping uncomfortably upon a spade. "But teckin' 'im out in a pram! . . . I meanersay, I dunna think a man oughter, y' know. It seems so—so daft, some'ow."

"H'm! Fancy being ashamed to take y'r own baby out!" said Belle.

"Course, when ' see 'im it might meck a difference. . . . But it's best not to catch y'r chickens afore they're 'atched, y' know. . . . But I dunna see why I should teck other people's kids about, meckin' a fool o' meself be'ind a pram, when Sylvie ought to do it 'imself——!"

Belle laughed out suddenly. A pleasant sound, thought Yvonne.

"Oh, Johnny——!"

"Eh? . . . Oh, I see, y've bin pullin' my leg! Well, y' got to pav for it!"

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There was a sound of scuffling. “Oh, Johnny, not here, where anybody coming up the lane would see us! No, not here, Johnny!”

But Johnny seemed unwilling to be denied, and then there was a deep silence, followed suddenly by Johnny’s voice singing merrily:

*“An’ when I tell them,  
An’ I’m certinly goin’ to tell them!  
That you’re the one little gel!  
In the world for me! . . .  
They’ll never believe . . . me! . . .”*

Yvonne listened to the merry voice with a smile upon her lips. Ah, that Johnny! *Quel comédien!* . . . Should she call for them? Or might her voice waken the baby? She glanced down at the little crumpled face, and her heart sang with happiness. . . .

“’Ello, who’s this coming up the lane?” said Johnny. “Oh, Lord! It never rains but it wets!”

A moment later a new voice spoke, the voice of one who battles bravely against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. “Mornin’ . . . mornin’, Belle! ‘Ow are y’? An’ ‘ow’s the little lass? . . . Me? Oh, I’m all right. Got a bit o’ wind, that’s all, all along o’ eatin’ onions. Y’ know, they *do* say as onions ha’ got more’n forty-five per cent. o’ potash in ‘em! Yes! I dunna eat ‘em reg’lar, ‘cause o’ me kidneys. . . . You all right, Johnny?”

“Yes,” said Johnny feebly.

“H’m!” said Miss Twitten. “Ah, well, Belle, ae’ll meck y’ a good ‘usband, my gel. Just you see as y’ treat ‘im proper!”

“H’m!” said Belle.

“Is ur awake?”

“I don’t think so. But I’ll see, if you want to see her.” There were steps outside the open door, and dear Belle appeared, looking very plump and fresh, as if she had come from an invigorating walk over the hill. “Hello, my dear! Awake, I see, and looking a treat,



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too!" She bent and kissed Yvonne, and the two girls clung to each other for a moment.

Then Johnny Waters entered, followed by Miss Twitten, a basket over her arm, her defeathered hat newly decked for the spring.

"'Ello!" said Johnny. "Feelin' better, Mrs. Dawe?"

"Yes, Johnny, thank you. Good morning, Miss Twitten!"

"Good mornin', my dear! An' 'ow are y'?"

"Oh, I am very well this morning, thank you!" She turned to Johnny. "And Johnny will take the baby in the pram, is it not?"

Poor Johnny blushed. "Course, if y' want me to," he said resignedly.

"She's laughing at you, Johnny, my dear!" cried Belle. "But you must go now that you've seen Yvonne. You know you haven't half finished straightening that garden."

"Righto, I will, if you'll come as well, Belle. . . . Y' know, what you want is good fresh air, Belle!"

She affectionately cuffed him.

"D'you want anything, Yvonne?" she asked, before turning away.

"No, thank you, my dear."

"If there's anythin' I can get y' just you say the word!" said Johnny, his long face alight with affection, his rabbit teeth shining in the sun.

"No, thank you, Johnny," Yvonne replied gratefully.

And Belle and Johnny went out, but upon the doorstep Belle said something that sounded like "even a Pom, Johnny!" and Johnny chased her out of sight.

"Well, it's a sight for sore eyes to see y' lookin' so well, my dear!" said Miss Twitten, setting her basket upon the floor. "An' 'ow's the babby? Ae looks all right, bless 'im!" She looked dolefully at the child, and then bent and kissed it.

"You like children, Miss Twitten?" asked Yvonne, to whom every movement and every sound seemed deliciously vivid, so new and clean and bright was the world, and so happy her body and mind.

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"Well, y' couldna suit me better'n to gi'e me a babby to mind!" She looked very melancholy after the words. "Y' know, I might ha' 'ad a child o' me own," she said in a low, strange voice, "but it wasna to be. The Fates wasna kind, an' I was left to suffer in single blessedness. . . ."

"You had . . . a lover?"

"Yes." Sally shook her head, striving to remember her latest romance as she did so. "Y' see, it was this way. . . . But I'm tellin' y' this, an' I 'avena told a soul besides! . . . Well, then! Ae sailed away acrost the mighty ocean," she continued, in an awestricken tone, "never to return to ur that loved 'im for 'imself alone! . . . 'Good-bye,' ae said, 'but wherever I roam, be it ever so 'umble there's no place like 'ome an' you sittin' in the corner,' ae said. Them was 'is very words!" She wiped dry eyes with her handkerchief, and heaved a convulsive sob that sounded, somehow, to have a real basis.

Poor Yvonne put her arm about the frail, stiff shoulders in their begged finery, and whispered words of comfort. Upon such a day she would not see anyone unhappy, she decided.

"'Ello, my little lass!" cried Granny Mary from the doorway, a basket covered with a clean cloth under her arm. "An' 'ow are y' this mornin'?"

"Better and better every day, as Coué said, Granny!" replied Yvonne, throwing her arms about the little old lady, and kissing the apples in the sweet old face. "And you! I see that you get more beautiful every day, dear Granny!"

When Miss Twitten had gone, after many promises to take care of the baby when he was old enough to go out, and when Granny Mary had assumed her sacking apron and was busily employed in tidying the little cottage, Yvonne lay back, and thought came to her. She found that she must have been thinking, perhaps subconsciously, during all these days when her mind had seemed blank. For there were conclusions she had made, she found, and some of them were so strange, almost so

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fickle, that she strove back into her thoughts to account for them. There was this thought of the child and of Willum George. Somehow the two had got mixed in her dreams. She had seen the plump, fresh face of the farmer's boy many times during these days, for he was still assiduous in bringing flowers for his love. And his hands she had seen, gripped about the stems of flowers, and sometimes, in her half-sleep, she had held them, mistaking them, almost, for the hands of her baby. The fingers were flattened and stubby and odorous: they were fingers that were familiar with the feel of wild birds' eggs and tiny squirrels and rabbits and field mice, and honeysuckle and wild thyme and may-blossom, and all the beautiful growths of the year—daffodils and violets and hazel-nuts and sunflowers and willow boughs, yellow water-lilies and catkins and berried holly and the rest. They were odorous fingers, that dealt in the crude materials of poetry. She would like her baby to have fingers like the fingers of Willum George. And a skin like the pink skin of Willum George. And little white teeth like the teeth of Willum George, teeth that were familiar with the touch and taste of wild raspberries and new hazel-nuts and seedy blackberries and new hawthorn shoots called "bread-and-cheese," and the bitter tang of "mouse's ear," and ripe acorns. Yes, she would like her boy to be like that. She had thought of Parisian children, of their pallor and big eyes and wistful city looks. No, her boy must not be like that. No, he must stay here and play with Willum George and all the tow-haired children of the village. So would he be strong and sturdy, so that when he went to France he might be a fitting son to serve his motherland. She would not like her boy to remain in the village after he had attained an age of about twelve, she thought, for then the sweet country boys developed into louts, smokers and drinkers and swearers. It was a pity. Where, then, did the beauty go? These country girls had more working poetry in their casual memories than ever the poets knew, but they became bent and sharpened and hard beneath the burden of toil and children. Where, then, did the

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beauty go? Somewhere the beauty went, the memories of moving scents and lights along the flowers and the awful hush of sunlit mid-morning in Bluebell Wood; but where? Some of it into the tow-coloured children, of course, yet only to be lost again. It seemed wasteful that these fingers that once touched the naked hand of romance should curl about a beer-pot and barter money for gain; that these girl-forms that were once as lithe as daffodil stems should grow angular and unlovely; that these eyes that had stared into the face of all Nature's wonders should grow hard and cruel and mean. With what a sad eye must Nature view the final forms of those who were once her children, she herself so unchanging in beauty! And yet. . . . Perhaps the beauty was there, after all. Perhaps it was only because of our blindness that we could not see it. Perhaps it developed from the beauty of form to the higher beauty of spirit?

Aunt Deborah, for example. Of course it was *her* grim face that had been before Yvonne in her illness, she thought; it was her hand that had been so tender; it was her voice that had pleaded so earnestly when Yvonne half-waked, half-slept. Aunt Deborah. That great, gaunt, grim woman, with her prejudices and her irritating voice and her strange religion . . . and her golden heart. Was there not beauty there?

And suddenly she remembered the black night, and the part the grim face of Aunt Deborah had played upon it. And a shudder ran through her frame. Ah, she must forget it, must never remember that night of horror, those months of torture! She must repel them at their every onslaught. Thank God and Mother Mary that her body was well, and that she was now in her right mind!

What, then, was the cause of the black horror that had so nearly engulfed her? It was not Aunt Deborah. No, she loved Aunt Deborah, more and more every day she loved Aunt Deborah. Then from whence had the horror sprung?

Slowly, as she viewed her life since the spring afternoon when she had driven from the station with Sylvester and Willum George to the Manor Farm, the evil detached

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itself. It had not been Aunt Deborah, or England, or the lack of amusements or anything, but . . . the dark little kitchen! There it was, plainly viewed from the fresh standpoint of the little cottage. The dark kitchen, the gloomy corners, the grim furniture, the dampness and the rats and the dead grandfather clock and that horrible, two-coloured card: "GOD IS LOVE." . . . All the black atmosphere of the place returned to her, and she shuddered in horror. The house had played maliciously with her nerves, and with her spirits, and finally with her happiness. The dark little kitchen! . . .

She inbreathed to inspirit herself, and had she known it the faint colour of health had left her cheeks. Sylvester, coming in in his best clothes, remarked it, and grew anxious.

"Yvonne!"

"Sylvie, my dear!" she answered him, and there was a glad smile in her eyes now, he saw. The colour was returning to her cheeks. "Ah, I did not think you would be home until one o'clock!"

They kissed, and Sylvester Dawe bent and picked the crowing child up from its cradle, the cradle that had once housed a mite who was to become Granny Mary. "Hello!" he cried to the stranger. "Don't you recognize your daddy yet? Don't you, you rascal!"

The baby began to cry.

"Give him to me," said Yvonne, and he laid the child beside her in the bed. He did so willingly, for suddenly the ludicrous thought had come to him that he was acting exactly like Mr. Redfin was used to act. And he began to think that, after all, Mr. Redfin had certain justifications.

His thoughts turned, as he saw Yvonne and their child together. He bent and kissed them both. "Happy now, my dear?" he whispered hoarsely.

"*Mais oui!*" she replied, tenderly stroking his gipsy hair. "Ah, *mon Dieu*, there is a white one, see, Sylvie?"

"Is there? Pull it." His head jerked back, and she showed him the long white curling hair. They looked at each other, she ruefully, he with love.

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“Ah, it is because of me that it became so, and see, I kiss it for its pain! And you, too, my dear!”

They kissed again, their hearts beating with happiness.

“But why do you dress so, *mon cher*?” she asked, scanning his clothes. “I thought that you and Farmer John were looking after the farm while Jack attended to the shop nowadays?”

He smiled, with anticipatory pleasure. “No, I left the ducks to Farmer John this morning, Yvonne. I had a packet by post this morning. Oh, and by the way, another letter from Berthe. That’s the second she’s written in a week, isn’t it? It’s there, on the table.”

Yvonne eagerly tore open the letter, and read of the further progress of Anatole Pierre Parrett towards perfection; he was now so big, said Berthe, that customers might hear his cries in the restaurant so that Anatole Père would brace himself up at the cash-office and look boastfully round at the diners. And how was Yvonne, and would she be coming soon? . . .

“Ah, it is good to hear from her so often!” said Yvonne. “And soon we will go to see them, my husband. . . . But you do not tell me of the meaning of this *fête dress*?”

He smiled secretively, and she stared. “I had a little packet by post this morning, Yvonne,” he said. “Guess what was in it?”

“To tell you about incubators, perhaps?”

“No.”

“A letter from your second wife!”

“No. . . . Our passports. I had to have mine altered to include you and the baby.”

She stared at him, smiling happily. “Ah, but it is a good thought, my dear,” she said. “And we go?”

“As soon as you are fit to travel.”

She sighed happily, healthy colour mounting into her cheeks. “Ah, it is wonderful to think of Paris and Berthe!” she said.

“Which would you rather do, live in Paris or in Brive?”

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"Live? You mean stay there for always? Ah, no, my dear, I do not wish that!"

He stared at her, unable to understand. "But you wish to get back?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, but just for a visit. . . . Ah, yes, I see that you are puzzled. I, too, was puzzled at the first realization of my wishes. But it is of the child I think, my dear. . . . Before all else he must grow to be strong and happy and healthy, like little Willum George. . . . When he is so, and you have saved money with the farm, then we will go to France to live and to educate him. But not yet. . . . France is not too kind to her children; the climate is not good for them, I think."

He still stared incredulously. Truth to tell he was not anxious to go, but he thought nothing of his own desires in these days. "You really mean that you don't want to go for good, Yvonne?" he asked.

"I do, Sylvie."

"Are you sure?" He bent, and took the dark, beautiful face in the cup of his hands. "You're not saying this just to please me?"

"No, my dear, I do it to please myself, for the sake of *le petit* Sylvester. . . . Always, it seems, I am thinking with love of one of my Sylvesters or of the other!"

They kissed and murmured together, their glances upon the face of the sleeping child upon Yvonne's bosom. "But the passports, they will be necessary, will they not, for Easter?" She smiled as he replied: "Ah, it will be delightful, this holiday!"

When he left her he went like a man upon whom fate has set the last seal of happiness.

### 3

They had beer to see her, all of them, Marion and Young Jack to shyly kiss her, Mr. Twitten and Aunt Martha and Granny Phyllis (Mr. Twitten to compare the little Sylvester with his own Samuel George, much to the former's disadvantage), Erb Boulger and his fiancée,

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bringing fruit from the shop of Miss Tavernor's father, Aunt Kate and Farmer James, fluffy-haired Gladys May (who came to weep over her and to laugh over the baby), and all of whom she had known. And all brought love, with the possible exceptions of Farmer John's brother and his wife, and even in their hearts there may have been some affection for the girl, for they brought flowers and vegetables, and did not seek to poke inquisitive fingers into the past. And Yvonne was happy at their coming, so happy that the black horror fled, never to torment her again.

Yet not all had visited her. There were two exceptions. Old Gaffer Johnny did not stir from the fire-side, yet it is almost sure that he missed Yvonne, who had been wont to coax him into speech and laughter, and particularly, into his Sunday suit. But the distance was too great for him, and he was ailing, they said.

The other was Aunt Deborah, and as the days passed on towards the visit to Paris and Brive, Yvonne grew impatient at Aunt's continued coldness. Why did she not come?

And one bright morning, nearly a fortnight after the morning when Miss Twitten confided her love affair, Yvonne scribbled a note to Aunt Deborah, and sent it by the hand of Willum George.

The world was very bright outside, as she waited in her chair beside the great window. What was the matter, that Aunt Deborah would not come? Was it that she had found the knife? Was she still angry with Yvonne about the horrible Christmas scene? Would she be glad to get rid of Yvonne, and was she disappointed that Yvonne was not going to France for good?

Willum George was a long time, she decided. What plump little legs he had. And little Sylvester would have legs like that. She bent and kissed the child, and crooned over it.

"'Ello," said a hard voice from the door.

Aunt Deborah stood there, her Sunday clothes upon her, her grim face turning from mother to child.

"Madame——!" began Yvonne, startled by her



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abrupt appearance. And then, for a moment, they looked, almost inquisitively, upon each other. "Madame, it is very good of you to come. Are you very angry with me?"

"Angry?" She strode, in her determined way, across to the girl, and deposited her sheaf of daffedils upon the little table. Her glance took in the two bottles of wine, and her lids narrowed. "No, my gel, what med y' think that?"

"It was that all had been to see me, all the world, and not you, madame," said Yvonne.

Aunt Deborah was surprised to see that the girl's fingers had begun to tremble. "Oh, no, nothin' o' the sort," she said in her grim way. "I thought . . . it seemed to me as I'd done enough to y' without comin' worryin' y' now as y're better an' feelin' 'appy agen. 'Ow are y' this mornin'?"

"Oh, very well, thank you, madame. You know that we go to France very soon?"

"Yes. An' glad to get away, I reckon."

Yvonne looked at her, at the grim mouth and the great nose and the brilliant grey eyes, at the severe collar and dingy black hat and clothes. And tears started to her eyes, and she caught the red hand of Aunt Deborah in her own. "Oh, madame, do you not realize that I love you? That I go but to return shortly? Do you not know that it has hurt me, that you have not been to see me? . . . Ah, madame, it is not well to treat those who love you so!"

"Be quiet, be quiet!" said Aunt Deborah almost fiercely, and bent to gather the girl in her strong, thin arms. "Dunna y' think as I can love as well as you, an' as well as young folk and folk as binna so old an' ugly an' narrow-minded as me? Do y' think because I'm such a bad woman as I canna love like you? Then y' meck a big misteck. . . "

"No, madame!" sobbed Yvonne. "I have troubled you and tormented you, and you know not all that I would have done to you! You are to me as one of the angels, madame!"

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"Sh! Y' mustna say things like that!" said Aunt Deborah reprovingly. "If I could only ha' bin sensible, my lass, I could ha' saved y' a lot o' cruel worry. . . . I bin a bad-un to y', my little lass, an' I dunna think as God'll forgi'e me as easy as y've done y'self. No, I'm doubtful, that I am!"

"Ah, yes, madame, He will make you one of His saints, I think!" cried Yvonne, kissing the cold, grim face. "Do you not know that I love you?"

• "Yes," muttered Aunt Deborah huskily. She bent and kissed the girl, holding her tightly as if she held there righteousness and the hope of heaven. Then she loosed her arms about Yvonne, and went over to the child's cradle, and bent there, trying to speak foolish words to the baby. But no sound would come from her trembling lips, and her eyes were very bright. . . .

They talked together in low voices, and then Aunt Deborah kissed her, and rose.

"Well, I must be off," she said. "There's the dinner to be cooked an' everythin' to be done. . . . Is there anythin' I can get for y'?"

"No, thank you, madame."

"An' if I was you I shouldn't drink too much o' that stuff," she said, indicating the bottles of *vin rouge*. "It doesna do y' any good, an' Sylvie 'ad never ought to ha' bought it. Well, good morning, my dear." She kissed Yvonne again, a warm kiss that tried to tell what the tongue could not, and then she was gone.

Yvonne watched her walk down the garden path to the lane. The sun shone upon the newly turned garden, where there were still a few primroses amid the flowering currant bushes, and in the trees, and in the sky the birds sang as if a new era had dawned. And down the path went the tall, grim woman in her ugly clothes, her body stiffly erect and unbending, her masculine stride so stern and determined. She turned to latch the gate, and saw Yvonne's beautiful face at the window. She waved, nodding her grim head, and smiling, it seemed, a little, but Yvonne's eyes were moist, and she could not be sure

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whether the lips had smiled. Then the austere head was turned, and she was gone.

Yvonne turned to the cradle, and crooned to her baby of France, but in thought she followed the tall, grim figure, dressed in its funereal black, marching so steadily onwards, looking so lonely and harsh and friendless, along the green lanes, where the sun shone, and birds carolled of love, and the flowers lifted their heads in wonder at the beauty of the world.

